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A MYSTERY [illegible]Y FOR GIRLS

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THE SHADOW STONE
THE WOODEN SHOE MYSTERY
THROUGH THE MOON-GATE DOOR
GHOST GABLES
THE PAINTED SHIELD

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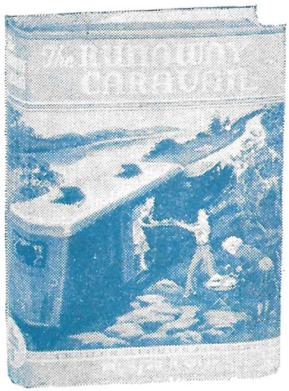

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by Mildred A. Wirt

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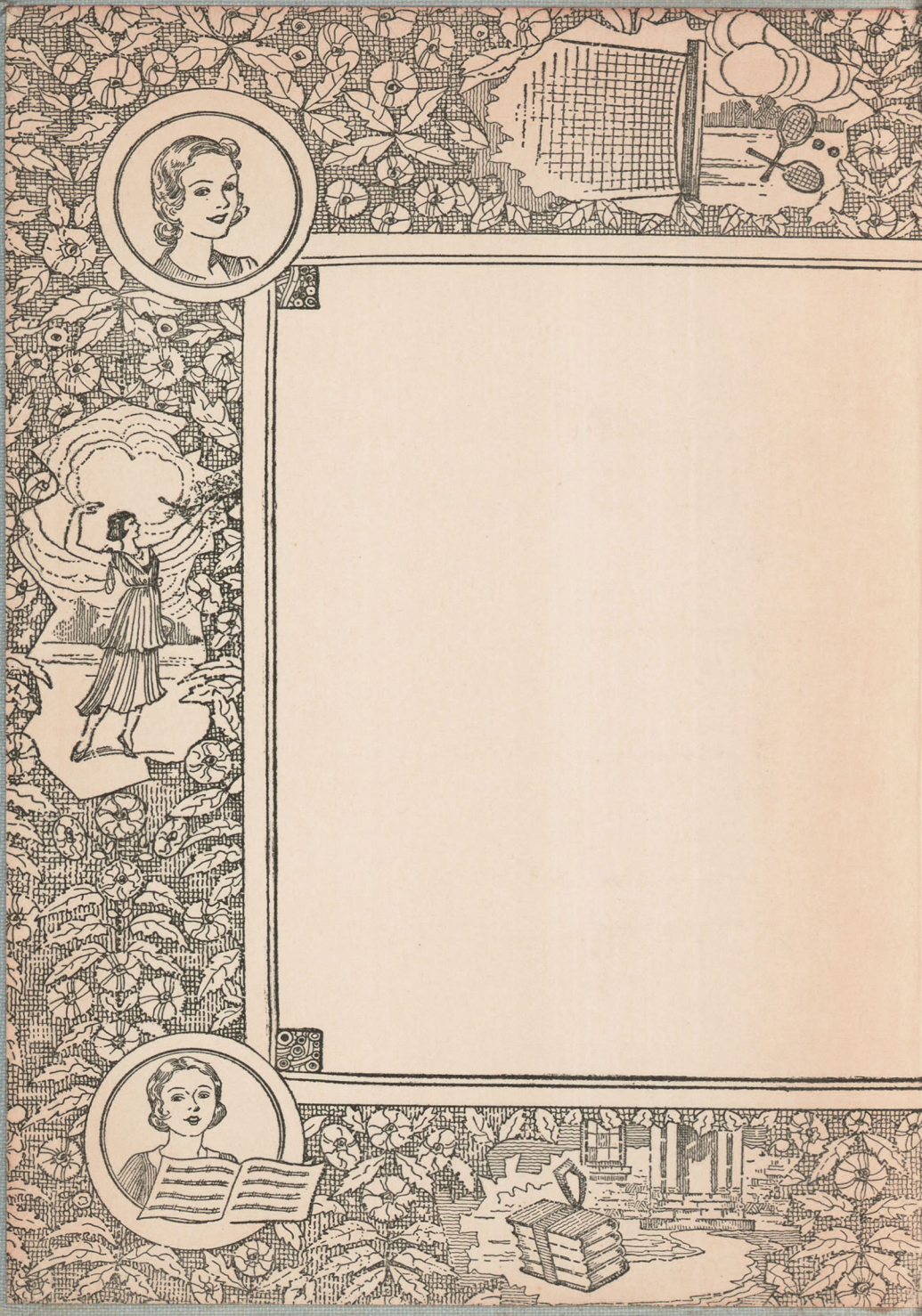

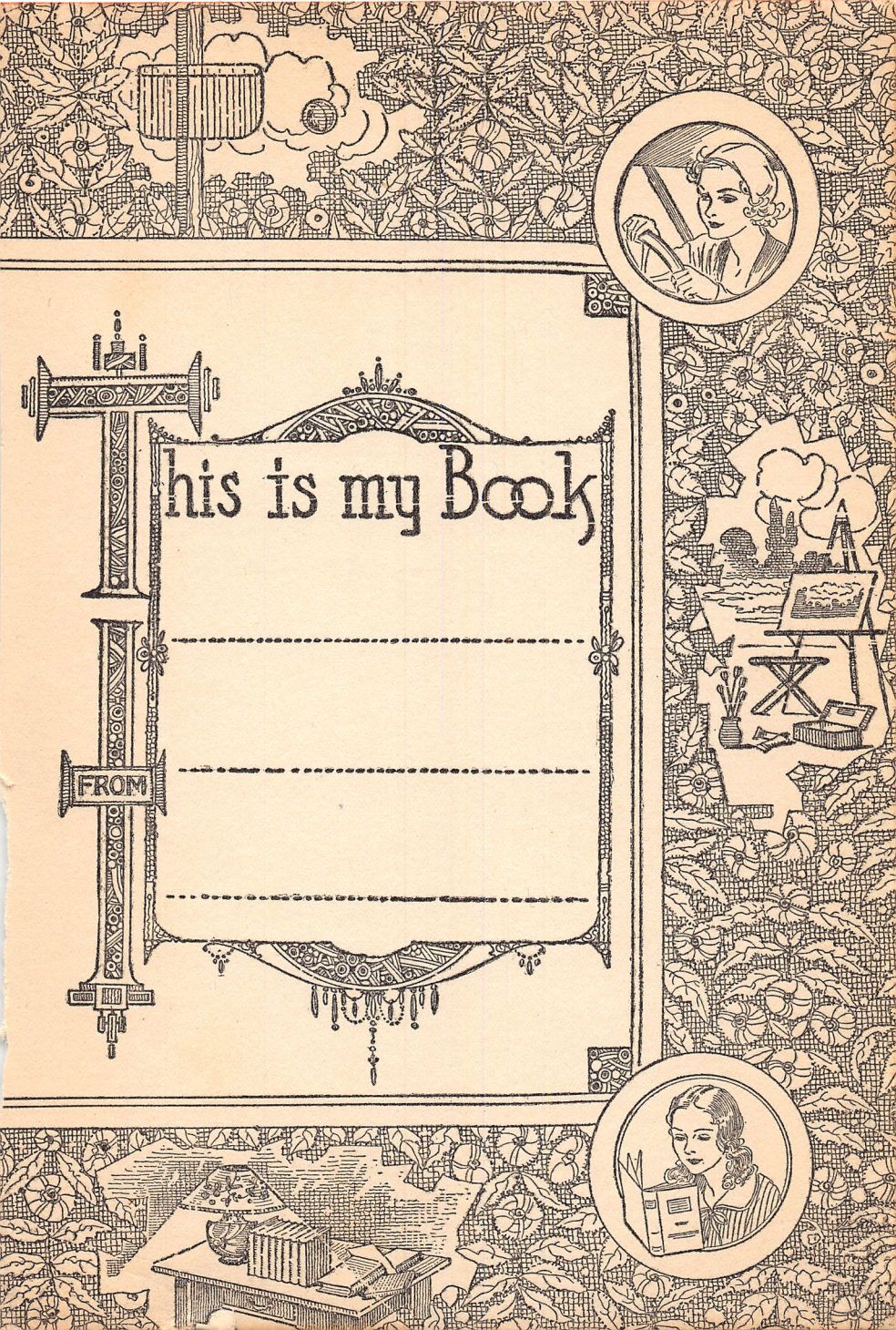
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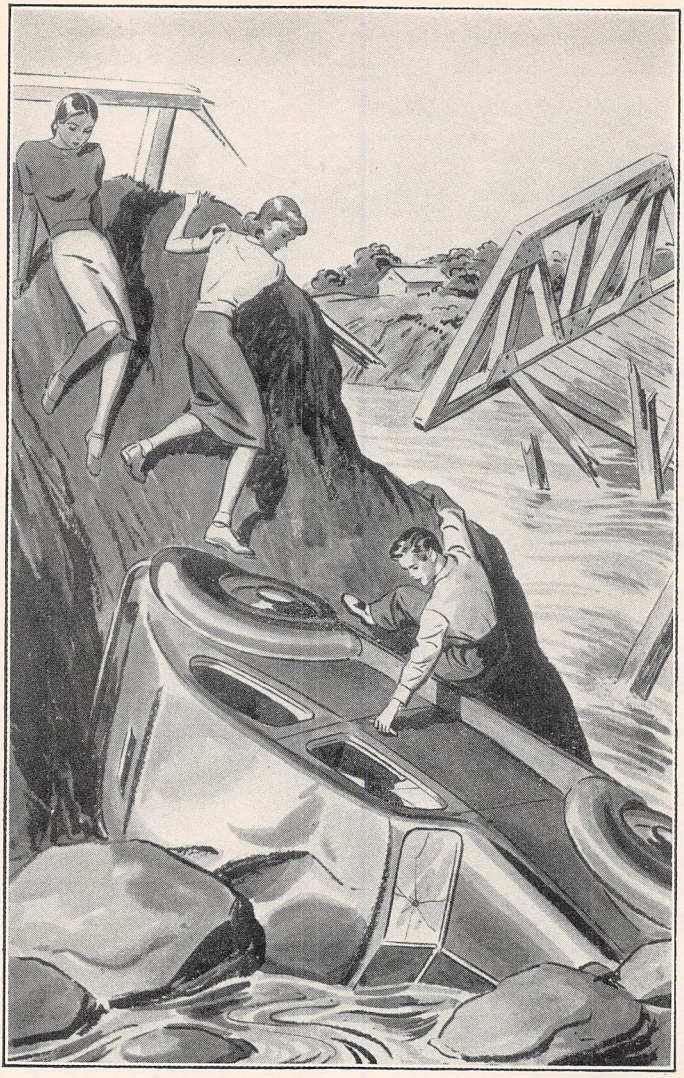

FAR DOWN THE DECLIVITY, LYING ON ITS SIDE, WAS A DERELICT AUTOMOBILE.

"The Painted Shield"

(See page 164)

The Painted Shield

By

MILDRED A. WIRT

Author of

PENNY PARKER MYSTERY STORIES
TRAILER STORIES FOR GIRLS

ILLUSTRATED

CUPPLES AND LEON COMPANY
PUBLISHERS NEW YORK

MILDRED A. WIRT MYSTERY STORIES

Large 12 mo. cloth illustrated

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THE PAINTED SHIELD

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	Breakfast Blues	1
II.	The Octagonal House	12
III.	Creaking Boards	25
IV.	Ralph Leigh's Partner	34
V.	Suspicion	43
VI.	A Girl of Mystery	54
VII.	Found in the Cupola	64
VIII.	Andres' Disappearance	76
IX.	A Vicious Attack	86
X.	Bfside a Hollow Log	95
XI.	An Oilskin Packet	105
XII.	A Contribution by Cheta	117
XIII.	The Picture Brick	127
XIV.	Locked in the Cellar	134
XV.	Over the Border	144
XVI.	Wash-Out	154
XVII.	In the Ravine	164
XVIII.	Pyramid by Moonlight	174
XIX.	A Shield of Honor	184
XX.	An Endangered Fortune	191
XXI.	Black Gold	201

THE PAINTED SHIELD

CHAPTER I

BREAKFAST BLUES

"BENNY, aren't you ever going to roll out of bed? Breakfast is nearly ready."

Frances Wayne, her golden hair bound beneath a blue bandana handkerchief, thumped the frying pan in a steady tattoo against the porch pole of the umbrella tent. The loud clatter produced not the slightest movement from the camp cot where her brother was sleeping. If anything, his snores became deeper and took on a certain artificial note.

"I guess the boy is worn out from his long fishing trip yesterday with Jim," declared the trusting Mrs. Kellog, who was frying eggs on the tiny gasoline stove.

"Oh, Benny isn't asleep," insisted Frances. "He's playing possum because he doesn't want to leave this camp. But watch me get him up!"

With an impish grin, the girl tossed aside the frying pan and began jerking up metal guide-rope stakes. The tent collapsed completely.

From beneath the deep billows of dew-soaked canvas came a smothered roar of protest.

"Say, what's the big idea?"

"Now sleep if you can, Mr. Benny Wayne," challenged his sister triumphantly. "Uncle Jim is in a hurry to break camp this morning. If you don't separate yourself from that bed we'll never get to the Clarksville Hospital as early as we planned."

"How can I dress with this tent on top of me?" grumbled Benny, his tousled head appearing from under the folds of canvas. "I wish Uncle Jim never had received that old letter from Mr. Leigh! Then maybe we could have stayed here a week."

Leaving her brother to solve the dressing problem as best he could, Frances went to help her uncle pack camping equipment into the family car.

James Kellog was a tall man of late middle age, with gray eyes and a ready smile. He had a slow manner of speaking, a tolerant disposition and a willingness to help any friend who was in trouble. Frances reflected that this latter quality now threatened to alter all the vacation plans.

Ten days earlier Mr. and Mrs. Kellog had left their home in Illinois, and "borrowing" Benny and Frances from the Wayne family, had motored leisurely down the Mississippi river to New Orleans. After delightful hours spent browsing in the Latin Quarter, they had ferried across the river and turned westward.

Their present camp site near a quiet bayou, bordered by giant oak trees festooned with mossy garlands, had proved a pleasant one, and even Mr. Kellog was sorry

to leave it. Yet he had promised Ralph Leigh that he would reach the Clarksville Hospital no later than the twelfth of the month, and so with many miles to be traveled, they must hasten on.

"Uncle Jim, just who is this Mr. Leigh?" Frances inquired abruptly as she packed dishes.

"Well, Ralph and I were associated in the real estate business nearly twenty years ago," replied Mr. Kellog. "That was before I married your Aunt Harriet and moved to Illinois. Ralph located here in Louisiana, keeping on in the real estate business. We corresponded for a time and then lost track of each other. Until a letter came two weeks ago, I hadn't heard from him in all of fifteen years."

"Why do you suppose he looked you up after so long a time, Uncle Jim?"

"I really wrote first, Frances. Ralph had just been in a bad automobile accident, and when he heard we were coming South he naturally asked me to visit him. Trouble makes a man think of his friends, I've noticed."

"It makes them think of *you,* Jim," spoke Mrs. Kellog as she poured coffee. "I'll warrant the man hopes to borrow money, and you know we haven't any to spare."

"Now Harriet, you misjudge Ralph," said her husband mildly. "He has plenty of money unless he lost it very recently."

"Then why was he so emphatic about wishing to see

you, Jim? It doesn't make sense that he would ask us to travel several hundred miles out of our way just to renew an old friendship."

"I don't suppose Ralph realized how much it would inconvenience us to come to Clarksville."

"Perhaps not, but it's my guess he has something special in mind."

"You may be right, Harriet. Ralph isn't the sort of man to ask a favor without cause. I'll be glad to do anything I can to help him—"

"How well I realize that," sighed Mrs. Kellog. "Oh, Jim, I do feel sorry for the poor man, but we planned this trip for years. Just this once it seems to me we should think of our own pleasure."

"Now aren't you building up trouble, Harriet?" her husband inquired soothingly. "Don't you worry, our vacation won't be ruined."

Despite Mr. Kellog's assurances, breakfast was not a cheerful meal. Benny and Frances shared their aunt's fear that the visit to the Clarksville Hospital might prove more than an interlude in their vacation tour of the South. They secretly wished that the letter from Ralph Leigh had never arrived.

While Aunt Harriet washed the dishes, Benny helped his uncle pack up the tent and fasten it on the running board of the car. Frances folded the blankets, stored the cooking utensils and attended to miscellaneous camp tasks. After a final perusal of the road maps, they

took their accustomed seats in the car and were soon on the highway. As the miles fell behind them, few words were spoken.

"Such a cheerful little family as I have this morning," remarked Uncle Jim ironically. "No sense in being so gloomy. We'll be in Clarksville by early afternoon. It shouldn't take me more than an hour to see Ralph. Then we'll double back and tour the Evangeline country just as we planned."

"At least that is what we all hope," said Aunt Harriet, sighing again.

The morning wore slowly on. There was no scenery worthy of attention. Save for occasional groves of bearded oaks which drew exclamations of admiration from the group, this particular stretch of country was barren.

At noon the little party stopped along the roadside to cook lunch, and then soon after one o'clock entered the city of Clarksville. Here the pillared houses, set far back in spacious yards, were old enough to be interesting. The streets were lined with giant shade trees forming a cool arch under which the car passed.

Mr. Kellog inquired the way to the city hospital and found a parking place within view of the white stone building.

"We may as well wait here for you, Jim," said Aunt Harriet.

"No, you're all coming right along with me,"

chuckled Uncle Jim, taking her by the arm and helping her from the car. "Then, you'll be on hand to keep me from making any rash promises."

"Well, since we are here, I really would like to meet your old friend," laughed his wife good-naturedly.

The four entered the hospital, feeling rather self-conscious because their clothes were wrinkled and dusty from travel. Mr. Kellog explained to a nurse that they wished to visit Ralph Leigh.

"Room 408," the young woman replied. "Just take the elevator to your left."

"And how is Mr. Leigh?"

"Oh, he is doing very well," the nurse answered cheerfully.

The four walked to the elevator. Benny quickly discovered that it was an automatic lift, and while Aunt Harriet watched uneasily, he investigated the various buttons and brought them safely to the fourth floor.

The corridors appeared deserted and the odor of ether was heavy in the air. After wandering up and down, searching vainly for a nurse, they finally located Room 408. The door was half open. Mr. Kellog made an ineffectual effort to comb his hair by running his hands through it, and then led the way into the room.

A man whose face was heavily bandaged, sat propped up in bed. At sight of the visitors he dropped a newspaper he had been reading.

"Jim Kellog!" he exclaimed in a hearty voice. "I *am*

glad to see you after all these years. I told the nurse you would drive in today."

The two men shook hands and their pleasure at seeing each other was genuine. After a moment Mr. Kellog introduced his wife and the two children.

"Not your youngsters?" Mr. Leigh inquired in astonishment.

"Our niece and nephew," explained Mr. Kellog. "Frances is fifteen and Benny is thirteen."

"Almost fourteen," corrected the boy.

For a time the conversation was general, and Mr. Leigh offered details of his recent auto accident.

"It happened about three weeks ago," he related. "I was driving along behind a trailer-truck, with another truck following close behind me. The first truck stopped for a traffic light. So did I, but the one behind plowed straight on. Result: A wrecked car, and about seven broken bones. With luck I'll be out of here in another month."

Abruptly changing the subject, Mr. Leigh remarked in a different tone:

"I suppose you're wondering why I asked you to come so far just to see me?"

"Why, we were glad to do it, Ralph," declared Mr. Kellog.

"Well, I appreciate it a lot, Jim. The truth is, I wrote to you because I have a great favor to ask."

Benny and Frances glanced uneasily at each other while the lines of Aunt Harriet's face tightened ever

so slightly. They had been afraid that something of this sort would happen.

Mr. Leigh propped himself more comfortably against the pillows and went on:

"Naturally, my business interests have suffered since I have been in the hospital. I've worried a great deal, particularly about a letter which came some time ago."

From the top drawer of a bedside table, he took a sheet of cheap looking notebook paper which he handed to Mr. Kellog.

"Do you read Spanish?" he inquired.

Mr. Kellog shook his head, studying the paper with curiosity. Obviously, it was a letter for it began, *"Muy señor, mío,"* but no name had been signed at the bottom.

"An anonymous communication?" Mr. Kellog asked.

"Yes, I would pay no attention to it save that it concerns a certain property known as Calverton Place which I handle for a client, a woman who lives in Mexico. Nearly a month ago she wrote, requesting me to sell the property, but I have been unable to inspect the place or have it appraised.

"Now this anonymous letter arrives, warning me that I will be wise to investigate at once because vandalism has been going on there. I am deeply disturbed."

"Haven't you a partner you could send?" questioned Mr. Kellog thoughtfully. "In your letters you mentioned a man named Sidney Harmond—"

"He is out of town at present," Mr. Leigh replied briefly. "That is why I wished to talk this matter over with you."

"Where is the property located?"

"Not far from Lormsdale, Texas. The locality is isolated, and the house itself is unique, I am told. It is octagonal in shape, resembling an old fort rather than a residence. The place has a strange history, but I'll not bore you with that now. To come to the point, Jim, would you be willing to go to Calverton Place and inspect the property? I am not satisfied that all is well there."

Mr. Kellog turned questioning eyes upon his wife who returned his troubled gaze. He replied to Mr. Leigh:

"I'd like to do anything for you I can, Ralph. But I am no judge of real estate values in the South."

"It isn't a matter of values, Jim. My real reason for asking you to go there is to learn if anything is wrong. It is a great favor to ask, I know, but you are one person I can trust."

"As for as I am concerned I would enjoy the trip," answered Mr. Kellog. "I'll leave the decision to Harriet."

Thus trapped, Mrs. Kellog avoided looking at Benny and Frances as she forced a smile and echoed her husband's words:

"Of course we'll be glad to do anything we can to help you, Mr. Leigh."

"Naturally I'll take care of all your expenses," the man returned quickly. "I've written out directions for reaching Calverton Place, and here is the key."

He handed his friend a closely written paper which Mr. Kellog carefully folded and placed in his wallet.

"There is one thing more I should tell you about the house," continued Mr. Leigh. "A certain mystery seems to be connected with it—"

Before he could add more a nurse quietly entered the room. She took the patient's temperature, and frowned as she noted down the reading on her chart.

"You must not overtax your strength by talking too long, Mr. Leigh," she warned. "I really think your visitors should leave now."

Mr. Leigh protested that he was entitled to a few privileges, but the nurse remained firm, so good-byes were regretfully said.

"We'll start for Calverton Place immediately," Mr. Kellog promised as he shook hands with his friend. "I'll bring you a report as soon as I can."

After Mr. Leigh had expressed his gratitude again, the little group left the hospital. No one spoke until they reached the street.

"I just knew something like this would happen," Aunt Harriet sighed. "I don't mind so much for myself, but Frances and Benny had set their hearts upon seeing the Evangeline country."

"You needn't feel concerned on my account, Aunt

Harriet," Benny answered cheerfully. "Maybe we'll see some ranches and cowboys."

"Nor on mine either," Frances added with a smile. "If there should really be a mystery at the old octagonal house, Texas may be well worth while!"

CHAPTER II

THE OCTAGONAL HOUSE

LONG stretches of pavement, shimmering under a blazing sun, led through swamp land and on to barren expanses of arid ground studded with rocks and cactus. Occasionally, there were fertile pastures where herds of cattle grazed. But long before the scenery became interesting, everyone was tired and hot, and all enthusiasm for the journey to Calverton Place had been lost.

"If this is Texas, I don't like it," remarked Frances plaintively from the rear seat of the car.

"Ditto," added Benny. "Why, there aren't even any hot dog stands or places where you can buy an ice cream cone. Nothing but wide open spaces."

"Texas is a big old state," remarked Mr. Kellog. "It won't all be like this."

"I wonder how far we are now from Calverton Place?" asked Mrs. Kellog wearily.

"About twenty miles, according to Mr. Leigh's directions." Benny devoted himself once more to the map. "We're supposed to turn off on a side road just after we leave Lormsdale."

"We'll stop and inquire the way when we reach the

town," declared Mr. Kellog, squinting to avoid the glare of the sun.

Lormsdale proved to be a small, sleepy-looking town with one main street devoted to business houses. A saddle horse tied up at a hitching post and a few inhabitants who went about in blue overalls and wide sombreros provided the western touch so much desired by Benny.

Mr. Kellog drove into a filling station. While the attendant checked the oil and gas, he inquired the way to Calverton Place.

"You all go two blocks to the first traffic light, then turn to your left," instructed the man. "About two miles and the pavement plays out. Turn again to your left, go about ten miles and turn right. Then follow the dirt road until you come to Calverton."

"About how far would you say it is from here?"

"A good twenty-five miles, sir. But it will take you an hour and a half. The road hasn't been dragged since the last rain."

"Then we'll not reach the place until nearly dark," commented Aunt Harriet anxiously. "Is there a camp ground anywhere near Calverton?"

"No, ma'am, there isn't, unless you pitch your tent on the Calverton grounds. It's real pretty out that way if you like it wild."

"Now let me see if I have my directions straight," Mr. Kellog murmured. "I go two blocks—"

Another automobile had driven into the station.

"Just a minute, sir," interrupted the attendant. "As soon as I take care of these other customers I'll go over it with you again."

Benny and Frances could not keep from staring at the dilapidated-looking car, for since leaving home they had not seen such a battered vehicle. Until the engine was turned off, it quivered and rattled and squeaked, as if trying to shake itself free from its mud-splattered fenders.

"Look at that old wreck," said Benny in a tone much too loud. "Mexican license plates."

His words carried to the occupants of the car. The young Mexican driver bestowed upon the boy a sharp, unfriendly glance, while the dark-skinned woman who sat beside him, raised her chin haughtily.

The rear seat was occupied by a young girl who might have been a year older than Frances. She had long dark hair which was tucked up under an old fashioned hat, and her complexion was so light that it drew attention. Observing Frances' gaze upon her, she turned her back and spoke in a low tone to her companion, a well dressed, middle-aged man, obviously an American, who somehow appeared uncomfortable and out of place in such an ancient vehicle.

"Neither the girl nor the man look like Mexicans," Frances whispered to her brother.

Benny's interest in the four passengers had been fleeting.

"Come on, Fran," he proposed, dismissing the sub-

ject. "Let's buy some chocolate bars while we have a chance. We'll be a million miles from nowhere when we get to Calverton."

Frances followed her brother toward the cafe which was operated in connection with the filling station. As she passed the ancient automobile, she glanced again at the girl in the back seat.

"I wish I had a complexion like hers," she thought. "But such dreadful taste in hats. And she must have bought her clothes at a rummage sale!"

A moment later, studying her own face in the mirror above the cafe counter, she reflected that perhaps she ought not to criticize anyone's appearance. Her own jaunty little blue hat had fallen to a rakish angle. A lock of hair straggled across her cheek, while the Texas sun seemed to have brought out a new crop of freckles.

"Admiring yourself again, Fran?" Benny inquired, giving her a pinch.

"No, I'm not," she retorted fiercely. "And allow me to say that it would do no harm if you glanced into a mirror once in awhile yourself! You look like a coal miner with that streak of dirt across your nose!"

While Benny scrubbed at the offending mark, a stout woman with a friendly smile and a soiled apron came to wait upon them.

"Hot today, isn't it?" she remarked cheerfully.

Benny and Frances politely agreed that it was, and bought a half dozen chocolate bars which felt suspiciously soft beneath their tinfoil wrappers. While they

were waiting for their change the door opened to admit the middle-aged man who had been an occupant of the Mexican car. Without glancing at Frances and Benny, he studied the menu tacked to the wall.

"Give me three tomato-lettuce sandwiches and one ham," he ordered curtly. "To take out."

"We haven't any more ham," the woman replied. "I sold the last an hour ago."

"No ham?" the man echoed in a tone which implied that a great injustice had been inflicted upon him. "Well, I suppose you'll have to make it four tomato-lettuce then."

He scowled, and perching himself on a high stool, drummed his fingers impatiently against the counter. Frances and Benny left the cafe. As they stepped from the doorway, they were directly opposite the ancient car with the Mexican license plates.

Frances paused, staring at the dark-haired girl who appeared to be an American. Her face was buried in a handkerchief, and apparently she was weeping. The Mexican woman leaned over from the front seat and patted the girl's hand comfortingly, while a torrent of Spanish words issued from her lips.

"What do you suppose is wrong, Benny?" whispered Frances.

Benny shook his head and moved on toward the Kellog car. Frances started to follow, then abruptly changed her mind. She went over to the ancient automobile, and spoke softly to the weeping girl.

"Excuse me, please, but is anything the matter? May I be of service?"

The dark-haired girl lifted her head and looked at Frances with startled eyes. She cringed back against the car cushion as if afraid. For a fleeting instant her glance went past Frances toward the cafe.

"No, no," she murmured uneasily. "There is nothing you can do."

The Mexican driver glared at Frances and said something to her which she did not understand. However, his tone of voice left no possible doubt that he was telling her in a pointed way to take herself elsewhere.

"Sorry," said Frances stiffly, and retreated with what grace she could.

Benny had been an amused spectator of the little scene. He grinned broadly as his sister climbed into the Kellog car.

"Got slapped down right, didn't you, Fran? I guess that will teach you not to go meddling in other folks' affairs."

"I wasn't trying to meddle," Frances replied and fell silent.

For some minutes she refrained from glancing toward the Mexican car. But finally, curiosity overcame hurt pride. She saw that the dark-haired girl had wiped away her tears and was gazing at her with an expression of deep interest. Their eyes met and then in embarrassment they both looked quickly away.

Presently, the middle-aged man came from the cafe

with a sack of sandwiches. He stripped a bill from his pocketbook and paid the filling station attendant, counting his change carefully. Turning to the Mexican driver he said briefly:

"Let's get started, Juan. We're late now."

"Si, Senor."

After a series of convulsive vibrations, the ancient car rolled slowly from the station. Frances watched until it disappeared from view around a corner.

"What queer people," she remarked, half to herself. "I can't help wondering who that girl is and why she was crying."

"In another minute you'll say she's being kidnaped," said Benny jokingly. "Don't start building up something, Fran. Those folks were her friends."

"The Mexican woman seemed to be consoling her. But I thought she was very uneasy in the presence of that middle-aged man who rode in the back seat. She acted almost as if she were afraid he would see her talking with me."

"Oh, you're always trying to make things look more mysterious than they are," said Benny, a bantering note in his voice. "Why not let the G-men take care of their own work?"

Frances considered the question unworthy of a response. She thoughtfully broke open the tinfoil wrapper of a chocolate bar and offered half of it to her brother.

Benny did not seem to notice the candy for he was staring blankly into space.

"What's wrong, Benny?" asked Frances. "I never knew you to refuse a chocolate bar before. Are you ill?"

Benny "came to" with a sheepish grin and reached for the candy.

"Excuse it, Fran," he said between bites. "I was composing."

"Composing! Now Benny, be yourself."

"Well, I was. A swell poem too. It's about G-men. Want to hear it?"

"Decidedly not," Frances replied firmly.

"How about you, Aunt Harriet?" Benny appealed.

"I should like to hear it very much," Mrs. Kellog returned as Frances suppressed a sigh.

"All right, then. Here it goes:

'G-men, Gee!
I really do not see
How G-men always get their man
No matter if he's gotta can
Of T.N.T.'"

"T.N.T. is like dynamite," Benny added as an explanatory note. "Don't you think it's a real clever poem? Maybe I ought to send it to a magazine."

"It's perfectly terrible, isn't it?" Frances said, appealing to her aunt. "'Gotta' isn't even in the English language."

"I gotta use gotta or it spoils the meter," Benny maintained. "Isn't that right, Aunt Harriet?"

"I believe a poet is allowed a certain amount of license in the use of words," remarked Mrs. Kellog, smiling.

"There!" Benny chortled triumphantly. "Perfectly terrible isn't such good English either, because if it's terrible it couldn't be perfect, and if it's perfect it couldn't be terrible and—"

"Oh, drop it, drop it," pleaded Frances, thrusting fingers into her ears. "We'll agree you are an improvement on Longfellow and let it go at that."

"You're just jealous," grinned Benny contentedly.

By this time the filling station attendant had repeated instructions to Mr. Kellog regarding the route to Calverton Place. After mentioning that the party should find a very pleasant camp site on the deserted grounds he casually added that the driver of the Mexican car had inquired about the same road.

"Were those folks on their way to Calverton too?" inquired Mr. Kellog in surprise.

"I don't know," answered the attendant. "They didn't say. But there aren't many houses out that direction."

"I wonder who they were?" interposed Frances, leaning forward eagerly.

"Couldn't tell you, Miss. I never saw them before. Well, come back and see us sometime."

Satisfied that he had the route straight in his mind, Mr. Kellog thanked the man and drove away. As the

car passed a grocery store, Aunt Harriet remarked that if they planned to camp out that night, they should stock up with supplies before leaving Lormsdale.

"Perhaps it would be wise to remain here for the night," she suggested doubtfully. "Then we could drive to Calverton early in the morning.

"Oh, we would lose another half day of our vacation," protested Benny. "Let's go on. It won't be dark for a long while yet."

"I don't believe there will be any good camp sites in this town," added Frances.

They stopped at the grocery store, and loading the car with supplies, took the left hand turn out of Lormsdale. Soon the pavement ended. The car joggled along over rough dirt road. Dishes rattled, and piece by piece the camping equipment tumbled down upon Benny and Frances.

The sun dropped lower in the sky and finally disappeared. Night came on more rapidly than anyone had expected. Mr. Kellog glanced anxiously at the speedometer, disappointed to see how few miles they had traveled.

"I thought we had gone twice this far," he murmured. "The best we can do, I'm afraid, will be to make camp in the dark."

"If ever we find a camp," supplied Mrs. Kellog. "We were crazy to try to reach Calverton Place tonight, although it is typical of us, I must say."

"Oh, it won't take us long to set up the tent," Mr.

Kellog replied cheerfully. "Looks as if we're coming to something now."

"Another road worse than this one," observed his wife.

Mr. Kellog brought the car to a standstill in front of two stone posts which marked the end of the public highway and an entrance to a private road. A broken down gate barred the way.

"This must be the boundary line of the Calverton place," remarked Mr. Kellog.

"I'll open the gate," cried Benny, springing to the ground.

He pulled the barrier away and the car passed through. It seemed to take Benny a long while to close it again. At last he trudged slowly to the automobile, holding an object in his hand.

"Look, Uncle Jim!" he cried. "I found a flashlight."

"Where did you get that, Benny?"

"It was lying on top of one of the stone posts. Someone must have put it there when he opened the gate, and then went off and forgot it."

"Water soaked?"

"No, it works. See!"

Benny tested the flashlight by shooting a beam into Frances' eyes.

"Odd," commented Mr. Kellog thoughtfully. "Evidently, Calverton Place has had recent visitors."

"I do wish we hadn't come here tonight." Aunt Harriet spoke nervously. "I had no idea the locality

was so desolate. And Mr. Leigh warned us all might not be right here."

"Now don't start worrying, Harriet," laughed Mr. Kellog. "Anyone might leave a flashlight lying on a post."

"Sure," agreed Benny. "I hope the owner never shows up because I've been needing a flash like this one."

The narrow washboard road wound on through rows of stately trees which stirred softly in the wind. Presently, the car came to a clearing. Mr. Kellog applied brakes and switched off the headlights.

Outlined in the moonlight, against a background of trees, stood a strange structure such as might have been conceived in the mind of a mad mathematician. Softened by shadows, the building seemed nearly circular, yet as one studied it closer, eight distinct sides were visible.

"It really is an octagonal house," observed Frances in awe. "How lonesome and deserted it looks."

"Why would anyone build such an architectural monstrosity?" shuddered Aunt Harriet.

"It looks more like a fort than a house," contributed Benny, and in the next breath he demanded: "Where do we pitch our tent, Uncle Jim?"

"I'll see if I can find a place," replied Mr. Kellog, opening the door.

Benny jumped from the car and went with his uncle.

"I do wish we had remained in Lormsdale tonight,"

Mrs. Kellog repeated again, watching the two retreating figures. "This place is too isolated for my liking. However, I imagine there isn't another soul within fifteen miles of here."

Frances had not taken her eyes from the octagonal house silhouetted against the dark screen of trees.

"I'm not so sure about being alone," she returned in a low voice.

"Why, what do you mean?" Mrs. Kellog turned her head to stare at the girl.

"Just as you spoke," said Frances soberly, "I thought I saw a light in an upstairs window."

CHAPTER III

CREAKING BOARDS

"Don't you think perhaps you were mistaken, Frances?" asked Mrs. Kellog, turning startled eyes toward the dark house.

"No, I am certain I saw the light," insisted the girl. "It looked to me as if someone might have struck a match near the window. It flickered for a moment and then went out."

For several minutes the two sat with eyes riveted upon the upper windows of the house. The light did not reappear.

"Benny and Jim may have gone up there," Mrs. Kellog said doubtfully.

"He and Uncle Jim haven't had time to reach the house. Anyway, they didn't start in that direction."

"Dear me, I hope you were wrong about seeing a light," Mrs. Kellog said nervously. "Somehow I don't care for this mission of ours. Mr. Leigh should have employed a private investigator."

Frances and her aunt both were relieved when Mr. Kellog and Benny finally returned to report that they had found a suitable camp site along the river, some distance from the octagonal house.

"Jim, you didn't notice anyone about the premises?" his wife inquired.

"The place is as deserted as a tomb."

"No sign of another car?"

"Not a sign. You'll like this place, Harriet, when you see it by daylight. I'll venture there is good fishing, too."

"I hope not," replied his wife emphatically. "In that event we'll be here the remainder of our vacation."

Mr. Kellog asked Frances to take the wheel so that he could show her where to drive.

"Be careful," he warned. "The ground is soft in places."

The girl slid into the driver's seat, and following Mr. Kellog's directions, brought the car safely to the glen which had been selected. By the light from an electric lantern, the camping equipment was quickly unloaded.

While Benny industriously pounded stake poles, Frances told him about the light which she had seen in the window of the octagonal house. She fully expected he would laugh at her, but to her surprise, he listened with flattering attention.

"Maybe after I get this job done I'll mosey up there and look around," he volunteered. "I have an idea myself that this place isn't as deserted as it's supposed to be."

"I'll go with you," Frances said eagerly.

She helped Mrs. Kellog make up the camp cots, and

then while her aunt prepared a belated supper, slipped away with her brother to visit the octagonal house.

As they emerged from among the trees it loomed before them, dark and massive, a weird architectural structure, fast falling into disrepair. Untrimmed vines had woven a web over many of the leaded windows, forming a solid mat on an upper floor cupola. Underpinnings of the porch had given away, adding to the aged appearance of the house.

"Did you ever see such a queer looking place?" Frances asked in awe. "I wish Mr. Leigh had told us its history."

After a moment they walked on, and drawing close, slowly circled the house.

"No sign of any light now," remarked Benny. "Where did you see it?"

"I think it must have come from the highest cupola."

"I wish we had asked Uncle Jim for the key. Then we could go inside and look around."

"You're braver than I," laughed Frances uneasily. "But I suspect you might not be so brave if we *had* brought the key."

Benny moved on to the sagging porch, noticing that the lower windows of the house had been boarded up. He tested the door and found it locked.

"Maybe you saw a reflection from the headlights of our own car," the boy suggested.

"They were turned off at the time, Benny. If the

doors are locked I suppose I may have been mistaken, but I was sure—"

Frances was startled as Benny reached out and deliberately placed his hand over her lips.

"Quiet!" he commanded in a whisper. "I think I hear someone tramping around in there!"

The girl and boy moved close to the door and listened. Unmistakably, they could distinguish the sound of heavy shoes walking on bare floors. The noise seemed to come from the second story.

"Maybe it's spooks," Benny muttered under his breath.

"Ghosts nothing," whispered Frances. "Some person who has no right here is prowling about. We must tell Uncle Jim at once."

After listening a moment longer, the pair tiptoed from the porch. Glancing upward, they noted that no light was visible in any of the windows. Then they moved swiftly away, breaking into a run when they were a safe distance from the house. They were quite out of breath as they reached camp.

"Oh, here you are!" Mrs. Kellog exclaimed in relief. "I couldn't imagine where you had gone. I was worried—"

"Where is Uncle Jim?" interrupted Frances anxiously.

"In the tent. Is anything wrong?"

"Benny and I were up looking at the house! And I

was right about the light. Someone is prowling about up there!"

"We heard the sound of footsteps in the house," added Benny. "But the front door is locked."

Hearing the excited voices of his niece and nephew, Mr. Kellog came out of the tent to inquire what was amiss. Benny and Frances repeated their story.

"We'll find out about this at once," he announced grimly.

"Now Jim, I wish you wouldn't try to investigate tonight," protested Aunt Harriet. "There's no telling who the intruder might be, and you are unarmed."

"Mr. Leigh sent me here to make a complete report."

"Yes, but he didn't intend that you should take unnecessary risks. Why not wait until morning?"

"And learn nothing, Harriet," replied Mr. Kellog, turning away.

He started off through the trees with Frances and Benny. Unwilling to be left alone in camp, Mrs. Kellog caught up with them, and they all hastened through the dew-laden grass toward the octagonal house.

Drawing near, they moved quietly, watching for any sign of activity about the premises. There was nothing to disturb the tranquillity of the night. The only sound came from the river where a lonely bull frog gave an occasional deep-throated croak.

Mr. Kellog crossed the porch quietly and stood listening by the door of the octagonal house.

"I don't hear anyone inside," he reported after a moment.

"The person may be gone by now," replied Frances. "But someone was in the house a few minutes ago."

"You both heard the noise?"

"Yes, we did, Uncle Jim," Frances assured him gravely. "Someone with heavy boots or shoes was tramping across the upstairs floor."

"Did you make any commotion yourselves?"

"We tried to be quiet. I suppose the person could have seen us from an upstairs window."

"You would have been plainly visible in the moonlight," Mr. Kellog agreed. "We'll see if we can get into the house."

He fumbled in his pocket for the key Mr. Leigh had given him, and fitted it into the lock. After manipulating it back and forth it finally turned. The door did not open easily and it required a vigorous lunge against the panel to swing it back.

"No one has opened this door for many months," Mr. Kellog declared with conviction. "However, there are other ways a prowler might have entered the house."

"I noticed another door at the rear," contributed Benny in a whisper.

He shot the beam of his flashlight over the floors and walls of the long, angular room. The illuminated circle was so small in diameter that it gave no real picture of the interior. The air was close, but not as

musty and stale as one might have expected in a house so long abandoned.

Opening a door, Frances found herself gazing into a tiled *patio,* angular in shape like the house, and overgrown with a jungle-growth of vines and plants. Moonlight flooding in from overhead, caused weird shadows to flicker on the walls.

A stone stairway led to the second floor, opening upon an ornamental iron balcony. Frances was staring up at it when she was joined by the other members of the party.

"We must all stay together," Mrs. Kellog warned in a whisper. "While there may be no one in the house, we can't be certain."

Mr. Kellog led the way up the stone stairway. From the balcony, the four entered a large bedroom with a massive fireplace. Benny's flashlight revealed a loose floor board. Mr. Kellog at once stooped down to examine it. He knelt for some time and then offering no comment, went on to the next room.

There he inspected the windows, looked briefly at a patch of plastering which had fallen from the wall, and remarked that some of the baseboards appeared to be loose.

"Do you think someone has deliberately damaged the house, Uncle Jim?" Frances asked after they had toured each room.

"It's too dark to tell much about the place," he returned. "At least no one seems to be here now."

"But you think someone *may* have been?" Frances persisted.

"I don't like to say."

"Why were you examining the floor boards so carefully?" inquired Aunt Harriet. "You thought they had been pried up?"

"Well, considering what Mr. Leigh told us, it's natural one would wonder if vandals had been at work here," Mr. Kellog answered evasively. "But it is too dark to tell anything tonight. In the morning I'll inspect the house thoroughly."

"Jim, I wish I could see your face," his wife said anxiously. "Your voice sounds strange. You are hiding something from us!"

"Now Harriet, could I keep any secret from you? Anyway, haven't you seen everything I have?"

"I'm not sure," Mrs. Kellog returned.

In a few minutes the little group descended into the *patio* again, and left the house by the front door. Mr. Kellog carefully locked the door, and tested the rear entrance as well. As he led the way back to camp, he talked of diverse subjects. Yet Frances observed that a subtle change had come over her uncle. While his words were casual, his face remained serious.

She dropped back to speak with Benny who was lagging far behind.

"Uncle Jim does believe that something is wrong at the Calverton house," she whispered to her brother.

"He's trying to make light of it so we'll not become alarmed."

"I think so, too," volunteered Benny suddenly. "When we were upstairs, I saw him pick up an object from the floor. Remember when he took so long to examine that loose board?"

"Yes, Benny, I do. What was it he picked up? Did you see?"

The boy shook his head. "It was something shiny and hard. I'm not sure, but I think it may have been a revolver."

CHAPTER IV

RALPH LEIGH'S PARTNER

THE next morning no one stirred from bed until the sun, beating down on the tents, threatened to smother the sleep-drugged occupants. Frances opened the tent flap to admit cooler air, and gazed out upon a pleasing scene. Camp had been made not far from a stream, and everywhere the country was fresh and green, for this section of the state had enjoyed recent rains.

Dressing quickly, the girl set a kettle of water to boil on the gasoline stove. While it heated, she tramped to the top of the knoll from which point she could see the octagonal house.

In the bright sunlight it seemed older, more grotesque and dilapidated, but less awe-inspiring.

"Darkness makes everything appear differently," she thought. "There isn't a sign of anyone around the place this morning. It doesn't even look mysterious."

Returning to camp, Frances found the others up and dressed. Over a hearty breakfast of fruit and pancakes, plans for the day were discussed.

"First of all I'll make a complete examination of the Calverton house," Mr. Kellog declared. "Then we'll decide when we want to start back for Lormsdale."

"I rather like it here this morning," admitted his wife. "Isn't it quiet and peaceful? Do you know, I am inclined to think we imagined everything last night."

Mr. Kellog offered no reply. Glancing quickly toward him, Frances thought she saw a peculiar expression pass over his face, but he arose from the table before she could be certain.

After the breakfast dishes had been washed, Frances and Benny set off with their uncle to visit the octagonal house. Unlocking the front door, they entered the living room. Their eyes traveled at once to a massive, smoke-blackened fireplace. The dusty floor disclosed a confusion of footprints in front of the hearth, yet upon the previous evening Mr. Kellog and his party had not investigated this part of the room.

"Someone has been here all right!" declared Benny. "Our shoes never made prints like those."

Noticing that several bricks had fallen from the fireplace, Mr. Kellog went over to examine the yawning holes.

"Broken out deliberately," he commented. "These bricks never loosened from age."

"Then someone has been damaging the house!" exclaimed Frances.

They passed through the dining room, the kitchen, and entered the *patio*. Warm sunlight beat down from above, making it a delightful place in which to linger despite its ruined appearance. Beneath a thick coating

of mud, the picture-tile floor still showed a brilliantly colored pattern.

"Mexican tiles," observed Mr. Kellog. "This *patio* is definitely Spanish architecture, yet the remainder of the house is not in keeping with the general design. One of the strangest mixtures I have ever seen."

"How old would you judge the house to be, Uncle?" inquired Frances.

"Well, it's hard to make an accurate guess because the place has been neglected so long. But it is old. I'd guess it was built at least fifty years ago, probably even before that."

Benny had wandered back to the kitchen, and now he shouted that he had found steps leading into a basement.

"I'll not go into that hole," Frances decided as she peered down the steep, narrow stairway. "It looks like a good home for all sorts of rodents."

While Benny and her uncle descended into the dark cavern, she wandered back to the living room to look at the fireplace again.

"I wonder if the person or persons who broke into this house may not have been searching for something which was hidden?" she mused. "And if so, what could it have been? Oh, I do wish Mr. Leigh had told us the history of the place!"

Absently, she bent down to pick up one of the bricks lying on the hearth. Close beside it was a scrap of writing paper of excellent quality. It was fresh and

clean and the absence of dust suggested to the girl that it had been dropped quite recently.

One side of the paper was blank. Turning it over, she saw that it bore a tiny embossed shield decorated with the brightly colored, angular face of an ancient warrior whose headdress bore fan-like corrugations. On the right hand side of the paper had been written:

"12 julio de 1939."

"That must be the Spanish way of writing the twelfth of July," thought Frances. "And it proves that someone has been in this house at least as late as three months ago."

While she studied the paper, her uncle and Benny returned from the cellar, reporting that they had found nothing but dirt and filth.

"Well, I've discovered something interesting," replied Frances, handing Mr. Kellog the torn piece of paper. "I picked this up by the fireplace."

"What is it?"

"I can't make it out, Uncle Jim. I think someone started to write a letter, then changed his mind and tore off part of the sheet."

"What is that funny looking design?" asked Benny, peering over his uncle's shoulder. "Is it supposed to be something like a coat of arms?"

"I wondered myself," replied Frances. "It looks a little like an Aztec war god."

"A which?" demanded Benny, whose knowledge of ancient history was decidedly limited.

"The Aztecs were a pre-historic race who lived in Mexico before the time of the Conquest," Frances explained condescendingly. "Isn't that right, Uncle Jim?"

"Yes, Prescott tells about it in his well known book, which Benny might do well to read. This shield has a curious design to say the least."

"Don't you think the date on the paper practically proves that someone has been in the house recently?"

"Yes," agreed Mr. Kellog as he folded the sheet and placed it in his vest pocket. "I made up my mind last night that all was not right here."

"Uncle Jim, you picked up something from the bedroom floor," Benny said suddenly. "Tell us what it was."

Mr. Kellog gave the boy a quick glance and smiled. "Hard to hide anything from you, isn't it?"

"Was it a revolver?" persisted Benny. "That's what I thought it looked like."

"Yes, I found a revolver," Mr. Kellog replied reluctantly. "It was lying beside a board which had been pried up. The owner, possibly working in a poor light, evidently laid it down, then forgot and went away without the weapon."

"Maybe it was that same fellow who left his flashlight on the stone post!" exclaimed Benny. "He seems to have a habit of misplacing his things."

Mr. Kellog nodded thoughtfully as he said: "I didn't mention the revolver last night because I knew

that it would probably just worry your Aunt Harriet."

"We'll keep it to ourselves," promised Benny. "I wish we could find some other clues."

"Let's look around upstairs," proposed Mr. Kellog leading the way to the stone staircase.

There were four large bedrooms, each opening upon the balcony overlooking the ruined *patio*. Only in one were acts of vandalism apparent, and here damage was confined to the floor and baseboards which had been pried up in several places. Plaster had fallen, but Mr. Kellog decided that the damage resulted from a leaking roof.

Wandering alone into the south bedroom, Frances noticed an adjoining cupola which had failed to attract her uncle's interest.

"The light I saw last night seemed to come from this part of the house," she reflected. "Yes, I am sure it was from this very cupola."

She went to the window, observing that the sill which should have been dusty, had been swept clean, as if a person had brushed an arm across it. Next her attention moved to an upturned orange box. On its top side, which evidently had served as a table, lay a decayed apple core, an oiled paper with a scrap of cheese still clinging to it, and a sprinkling of cigarette ashes.

"Uncle Jim! Benny!" she called.

They came hurrying to the cupola to inquire what she had discovered.

"Someone has been living here!" Frances pointed

dramatically to the orange box. "Or at least I've found the remains of a lunch."

"Oh, it's clear enough the house has been entered recently," agreed her uncle.

"What I should like to know is *who* came here and *why*."

"I guess that is what Mr. Leigh sent us to learn," replied Mr. Kellog.

"It all seems so strange," Frances said thoughtfully. "Floor boards pried up, bricks torn from the fireplace. What secret does this house hide?"

"We'll never know the answer, I fear," replied Mr. Kellog. "The person or persons who have been here may not return. We might stay here and keep watch of the place, only we have our vacation to think about."

"Uncle Jim, are you trying to tease us?" Frances demanded suspiciously. "You know we'd hate to go away now and leave all this mystery."

"We like it here," Benny added. "We have a dandy camping place and it doesn't cost us a penny either."

"Uncle Jim, please let's not leave right away," pleaded Frances.

"But I told Mr. Leigh I would make an investigation and give him an immediate report."

"Can't you write him?" suggested Benny. "Or send a telegram? He'll probably be grateful to you for staying on since conditions are this way."

"I could wire Mr. Leigh," Mr. Kellog agreed. "Suppose we talk it over with your Aunt Harriet."

They found Mrs. Kellog in camp sitting with her back to a tree, gazing dreamily at the river. The tired, travel-worn lines had faded from her plump face, to be replaced by a look of complete contentment.

"Whatever you want me to do, I'll not do it," she laughed before anyone could speak. "I have every intention of sitting right here until lunch time."

"We thought you would be in a hurry to break camp," her husband remarked, leading her on.

"I've changed my mind about this place," Aunt Harriet replied. "I wish we could stay here long enough to get a little rest."

"We can!" cried Frances.

"Uncle Jim says he'll send Mr. Leigh a wire," declared Benny. "We're driving in to Lormsdale right away, aren't we?"

"That seems to be the way it is arranged," Mr. Kellog responded amiably. "Anything you need in town, Harriet?"

"Fresh meat and more fruit."

"You don't mind being here alone, do you?" Frances asked her aunt. "If you're at all afraid, I'll be glad to stay."

"No, run along, child," Mrs. Kellog laughed.

The trip to Lormsdale did not take more than an hour for by now Mr. Kellog was familiar with the route. Even the road did not seem as dusty or bumpy as upon the previous day.

Arriving at Lormsdale, the three lunched leisurely at

a little restaurant, purchased camp supplies, and then went to the telegraph office. Benny and Frances sat down on a bench to wait while their uncle composed a fifty-word night letter to his friend, Ralph Leigh.

Presently, the outside door opened and a man in a gray suit and matching felt hat entered the office. Glancing up, Frances was startled for she recognized the newcomer. She nudged her brother to attract his attention.

"Isn't that the same man we saw yesterday in the Mexican car," she whispered.

Benny nodded. He had made the observation for himself.

The man paid no attention to the boy and girl or to Mr. Kellog. He went briskly to the front desk, addressing himself to the clerk.

"Have you a telegram for me?"

"Your name, please."

"Sidney Harmond."

If the name proved startling to Benny and Frances, it was even more so to Mr. Kellog. He glanced up from the message he was writing and regarded the newcomer with keen interest.

Mr. Kellog hesitated an instant and then moved toward the man.

"I beg your pardon sir," he said politely. "I couldn't help hearing your name. By any chance are you Ralph Leigh's partner?"

CHAPTER V

SUSPICION

SIDNEY HARMOND turned to regard Mr. Kellog with a sharp glance which carried a suggestion of dismay. However, the expression quickly changed, and he smiled.

"Why, yes, Ralph Leigh is my partner," he admitted. "I ran up here today from Clarksville to look after a little business matter for him. But I don't believe I know you."

"My name is James Kellog. Mr. Leigh and I are very old friends."

"Oh, yes, it seems to me I have heard Ralph mention you." Sidney Harmond spoke somewhat stiffly. "Glad to meet you, I'm sure."

"Mr. Leigh sent me here to inspect Calverton Place," Mr. Kellog revealed as an awkward silence fell. "Perhaps you came for the same reason?"

Sidney Harmond laughed uneasily and a wary look came into his steel gray eyes.

"No, I can't say I did, Mr. Kellog. Ralph would never trust me with such an *important* matter." He smiled ironically.

There was another awkward pause, and then the man inquired in a tone which was casual again:

"Have you inspected the Calverton property yet, Mr. Kellog?"

"Yes, we drove out there last night. The house is badly run down."

"You don't say. Well, Ralph will be disturbed to hear that. He's a great fellow to worry. Returning to Clarksville today?"

"I rather think we'll camp at Calverton for a few days. My wife is with me. Also my niece and nephew." Mr. Kellog nodded toward Benny and Frances who had listened to the conversation.

Sidney Harmond's eyebrows drew together in a slight frown as his gaze rested briefly upon the boy and girl. Yet if he recalled having seen them the previous afternoon, he gave no further sign.

"I'll be driving back to Clarksville late today in all probability," he said, addressing Mr. Kellog again. "If you wish, I can relay your report to Ralph."

"Thank you," replied Mr. Kellog dryly, "but I'll just send him this wire."

Sidney Harmond watched thoughtfully as the other man filed the message with a clerk. After a moment he inquired in an off hand way: "How soon are you driving back to Calverton?"

"Right away."

"I might ride along with you. Perhaps I may be of service in helping you find a good camp site."

"Oh, we have one now, Mr. Harmond. But we'll be glad to have you come with us."

Mr. Kellog introduced his niece and nephew and they all left the office together, returning to the parked car. Although Sidney Harmond made a point of being very agreeable, Frances could not bring herself to trust him. She secretly considered her uncle unwise to answer the man's questions so freely.

"He's deliberately trying to find out just what we learned at Calverton Place," she reflected. "For some reason he didn't want Uncle Jim to make his report to Mr. Leigh. I wonder why?"

During the ride back to the octagonal house, Mr. Harmond exerted himself to be a pleasant companion. He told many interesting historical facts about the state of Texas, and only when he mentioned his partner did his voice take on a harsh note.

"Mr. Leigh has changed a great deal in recent years," he remarked. "Especially since his auto accident. I try to excuse it, but frankly, I sometimes find his attitude hard to bear."

"Just what do you mean?" inquired Mr. Kellog.

"Take this Calverton affair, for instance. I've handled it since Raquel Calverton first placed the property in our hands. Now Ralph Leigh takes a sudden and altogether ridiculous notion that something is wrong here. Instead of trusting me to investigate, he calls in a stranger. I really cannot understand his taking such a step."

"I am scarcely a stranger," remarked Mr. Kellog quietly.

"I didn't mean that," Mr. Harmond corrected himself hastily. "But I was the logical person to look after matters at Calverton. Mr. Leigh gave me a deliberate slap when he called in another person. Not that I hold it against him. As I say, he's not been himself the past year."

"You believe that Ralph is failing in health?"

"In mental health, yes."

Mr. Kellog started to reply, and then changed his mind. He drove for a time in silence, eyes on the road, his lips grim. From the very set of his jaw, Benny and Frances knew that Mr. Harmond's remark had angered their uncle.

Presently, Frances broke the long period of quiet by asking a question.

"Mr. Harmond, you mentioned a woman named Raquel Calverton. Is she the present owner of the octagonal house?"

"Yes, the woman lives in Mexico, and I might add, has an inflated idea of the value of the property."

"When we were in Clarksville, Mr. Leigh suggested that the house had a rather strange history."

"Somewhat unusual," Mr. Harmond admitted. "A Confederate officer named Calverton went down into Mexico as so many of the rebels did after defeat in the Civil War. Later he held a high command in the Mexican army, fell into disgrace, and finally was killed

during one of the many revolutions before Diaz came into power. Calverton's wife, Donna Paquina, and a young son were forced to flee the country."

"They came to Texas?" inquired Frances.

"Yes, Donna Paquina's husband had owned the land where the octagonal house now stands. She went there and built an expensive but grotesque place. But then, if you've seen it, you know. I understand it is a combination Mexican *patio* house and a replica of a fort where her husband once commanded."

"What ever induced her to build such a strange house?" Frances asked curiously.

Sidney Harmond shrugged. "No one knows. The old lady was half-crazed from grief. I suppose she may have thought she was building a monument to her husband's memory. I'll say this, she put good material into the house. It has stood for more than sixty years and it should last many more."

"You have inspected the house?" Mr. Kellog inquired, giving the man a quick glance.

"Only from the outside."

"What ever became of Donna Paquina?" Frances questioned as Mr. Harmond showed no intention of carrying on the narrative.

"The same thing which happens to us all eventually. She died. Her grave is somewhere on the premises."

"And her son?"

"Later he returned to Mexico, married, and I believe had a son of his own. It is this man's wife, Donna

Raquel who now owns the property and wishes us to dispose of it for her."

"You mentioned that the original Calverton fell into disgrace," remarked Benny. "What did he do?"

"I really couldn't tell you, son. I never heard that part of the story."

"Mr. Leigh suggested that there was a certain mystery connected with the house," ventured Frances.

"Mystery?" Mr. Harmond laughed scornfully. "Not to my knowledge. No, that only proves what I was saying. Poor Ralph has a tendency to exaggerate everything lately."

Mr. Kellog did not like the deprecatory manner in which the man spoke of his partner. His brief interview with Ralph Leigh at the hospital had not led him to believe that his friend was lacking in mental vigor. Rather, he was inclined to think that Sidney Harmond bore a grudge because the appraisal of the Calverton property had not been left in his hands.

Benny and Frances shared similar thoughts, and slightly less charitable ones. Sidney Harmond could be pleasant enough when he tried, but they recalled that the first time they had seen him he had appeared an altogether different type of person. Obviously, he did not remember seeing them in the filling station, and had no intention of explaining his presence in the Mexican car.

Nor had Frances forgotten the attendant's remark that the Mexican party had inquired about the Calver-

ton road. She wondered if Mr. Harmond had visited the octagonal house upon the previous evening, but she could think of no purpose in such a call. Unless —the possibility startled her—Mr. Harmond might know significant facts connected with the history of Calverton Place which he had not revealed!

"Mr. Harmond, have you been in Lormsdale very long?" she inquired, just to see what he would say.

"No, I arrived late this morning. I was in western Louisiana looking after a business matter for Mr. Leigh. A man in Lormsdale owes me a note so I dropped over to talk with him about it."

"I thought I understood you to say previously that you were here on business for Mr. Leigh," reminded Mr. Kellog.

"Did I give such an impression? I didn't mean to, I assure you. In fact, I would be sorry to have Ralph learn I was in Lormsdale. He might misunderstand."

"Misunderstand?" repeated Mr. Kellog.

Sidney Harmond shifted uncomfortably in the car seat.

"I shouldn't want Mr. Leigh to get the idea I was trying to interfere with your inspection of the property. See what I mean?"

"No."

"Well, you would if only you knew Mr. Leigh better. I'll regard it as a favor if you say nothing about our meeting." The man shrugged and abruptly changed the subject.

Soon the car turned into the private road and came within view of the river site where the tents had been pitched.

"Oh, I see," murmured Mr. Harmond, frowning. "You've camped in the glen. Find it a quiet place, do you?"

"So far, yes," responded Mr. Kellog briefly.

"Any reason why it shouldn't be quiet?" demanded Benny.

"No, of course not." Mr. Harmond's laughter sounded a trifle forced. "I never heard that Calverton had any ghosts."

"Nevertheless, we saw a light in one of the windows last night," Frances said, and then was sorry she had made an unnecessary revelation.

For the first time during the long ride Sidney Harmond really looked at the girl appraisingly.

"I should think it would be very easy for one to imagine that he saw lights or heard unusual sounds at Calverton," he remarked lightly. "I know I shouldn't care to spend a night there."

"You're not by any chance suggesting that we leave?" asked Mr. Kellog.

"No, if the place is to your liking, by all means stay. However, I might suggest that you move your camp across the river."

"For what reason?"

"It is higher ground. In case of a storm you would be safer there."

"Thanks for the suggestion," responded Mr. Kellog. "We may decide to move later on."

The car stopped not far from camp. Benny and Frances carried the sacks of groceries to the tents, leaving their uncle to follow with Mr. Harmond.

"That fellow has some scheme in mind!" Benny muttered to his sister. "You can just bet he didn't come out to Calverton for the ride!"

"I think he hopes to persuade Uncle Jim to leave," Frances whispered. "I don't trust him at all."

Mr. Kellog introduced the visitor to his wife. After they had chatted for a few minutes Mr. Harmond suggested that he should like to visit the octagonal house.

"You needn't bother to show me through," he said genially. "Just give me the key and I'll look around by myself."

"Oh, I have plenty of time," answered Mr. Kellog.

Frances went with the two men to the octagonal house. As they wandered from room to room the conviction came upon her that Mr. Harmond had been there before and was thoroughly familiar with the interior.

When finally they all returned to camp, the man made another attempt to persuade Mr. Kellog that it would be wise to move the tents.

"I agree with you that someone has been prowling through the Calverton house," he said earnestly. "I don't believe it is safe to camp here."

"I never was one to run from danger," replied Mr. Kellog.

"You should consider your wife and the two youngsters."

"But we like it here so very much, Mr. Harmond," said Frances almost too sweetly.

Her tone warned the man that he had gone as far as he dared.

"Well, I see you'll not listen to advice. Sorry, because my only reason in coming out here was to try to be of service. Now, if I may trouble someone to take me to the main road, I'll catch a ride into town."

"I'll drive you in to Lormsdale," offered Frances before her uncle or Benny could speak.

"Only to the main road," insisted Mr. Harmond stiffly. "I shouldn't think of putting you to any more trouble."

Benny decided to go along, so the three drove to the end of the lane and turned into the dirt road. At the first corner where another highway joined in, Mr. Harmond requested that he be allowed to alight.

"Oh, I'll take you farther than this," protested Frances. "It might be an hour before another car comes along."

"I see one now," Mr. Harmond declared, opening the door. "Please let me out."

Another automobile could be seen slowly approach-

ing on a bisecting road, so Frances was glad to obey the command.

"Don't bother to wait." Mr. Harmond alighted and slammed the door shut.

Thus dismissed, Frances turned the car around in the narrow road and drove away.

"Stop just around the bend, Fran," said Benny quietly.

"But why, Benny?"

"I want to see what Mr. Harmond does. I have a hunch he may not hail that car."

When the automobile was hidden by trees, Frances brought it to a halt at the side of the road. The two alighted and walked back a few yards until they could see the corner where they had left Mr. Harmond.

"Why, he's gone!" exclaimed Frances.

The man no longer stood at the side of the road.

For a moment Benny and Frances were puzzled. Then they saw that Mr. Harmond had stepped back into the bushes where he waited until the approaching automobile had passed.

"Didn't I tell you!" whispered Benny.

Mr. Harmond remained in hiding until the car had disappeared in a cloud of dust. He then walked down the road for a short distance. Coming to a gap in the wire fence, he scrambled through and vanished into the dense woods which bordered Calverton Place.

CHAPTER VI

A GIRL OF MYSTERY

"THE old sneak!" exclaimed Benny in disgust. "Wouldn't you guess he'd try a trick like that?"

"Where do you think he is going?" asked Frances. She was deeply puzzled by Sidney Harmond's strange actions.

"Back to the octagonal house, of course." Benny spoke with conviction. "Didn't he try his best to get Uncle Jim to let him take the key and go there alone? Oh, he's after something in that place, all right!"

"Let's follow him."

"You start on, while I park the car off the road, Fran. I'll catch up in a minute."

While her brother ran back to the car, Frances leaped a ditch, scrambled up a steep bank and crawled under the fence. In her haste, the sleeve of her dress caught on one of the barbed wires and tore a jagged hole, but she scarcely noticed as she went on into the woods.

Sidney Harmond was only a short distance ahead, walking leisurely, almost as if he enjoyed the tramp for its own sake. He would pause now and then to

gaze up at a tall tree or to examine a plant which attracted his interest.

"Maybe he's only an amateur botanist out on a field trip and not a black-hearted villain," thought Frances in disappointment. "If he should discover me trailing him, I'll feel lower than a wiggly worm!"

Within a few minutes, she heard Benny coming behind her, and the shuffling of his heavy shoes through the dry sticks and leaves made a startling contrast to the quiet of the woods. Either Mr. Harmond was slightly deaf or preoccupied, for he did not turn his head to look around.

"Why don't you ring a bell?" Frances whispered to her brother as he came up. "Do you want him to hear you?"

They fell farther behind and took care to make no sound as they walked. Soon it became evident that if Sidney Harmond were returning to the octagonal house his route was a circuitous one.

"It begins to look as if you guessed wrong, Benny," Frances murmured after they had followed for a long distance. "I think we ought to turn back."

"We're coming to the end of the woods now," responded her brother. "Let's follow a little farther and see where he does go."

Mr. Harmond emerged into the clearing, and a moment later the boy and girl reached the edge of the forest. Gazing out through the trees they were astonished to see that the man was walking toward a

small, deserted-looking cottage. Yet it was not deserted, they noted, for thin wisps of wood smoke curled from the chimney.

"I didn't know that building was here!" exclaimed Frances. "It must be an old foreman's shack."

"Plenty of things we don't know about Calverton Place," muttered Benny, his eyes upon Sidney Harmond who was moving rapidly across the clearing. "But you can just bet that old buzzard has some of the answers!"

"You don't suppose he's living at the cottage? He told us he was returning to Clarksville."

"He told us a lot of other things that weren't true, too."

They both concentrated their attention upon the man. Reaching the cottage, he rapped twice on the door. Then before anyone could admit him, he boldly entered.

"I wonder who is living there?" Frances murmured.

"Let's sneak up to the window and see," proposed Benny eagerly. "That's the way a smart deteck-i-tive always works."

Frances was sorely tempted, but she shook her head.

"No, Benny, we've already carried this prying business far enough. Let's go back to camp."

"Shucks, Fran, you've been moaning around that you wished a mystery would come your direction. Here it bumps smash-bang into you and what do you do? Squirm to get away!"

"Only yesterday when I called attention to Mr. Harmond's strange traveling companions, didn't you make fun of me?"

"That was yesterday, Fran. Anyway, how could I know then that he was Ralph Leigh's partner? I'm not chairvoyant."

"The word is *clairvoyant,*" corrected his sister. "My point is this. Since we do know that Mr. Harmond is Ralph Leigh's partner, think what a position it would put Uncle Jim in if the man should learn we are spying on him."

"Uncle Jim doesn't like him either."

"That may be, but he'll not wish to affront him if he can help it."

"Maybe you're right," Benny admitted reluctantly. "Only I don't believe Mr. Leigh thinks any too much of his partner. If he trusted Harmond why didn't he send him here instead of Uncle Jim?"

"I don't know," admitted Frances. They walked a short distance back through the woods before she added: "I wonder if those same folks we saw in the Mexican car are living in the cottage?"

"We could have learned if you hadn't been so cautious," grumbled Benny.

They found the car where it had been left at the side of the private road, and drove back to camp. Aunt Harriet commented upon their long absence, but asked no direct questions, assuming that they had taken Mr. Harmond all the way to Lormsdale.

"Where is Uncle Jim?" inquired Benny, glancing about the camp.

"He went fishing. If you and Frances expect to be around here for a little while, I'll go for a walk."

"While you're gone, I'll start dinner," volunteered Frances.

For want of another occupation, Benny seated himself under a tree and began to re-wind his own fishing reel which had been left badly snarled. He paid no attention to his sister as she peeled potatoes and prepared vegetables. After starting the food to cook, Frances put up the folding table, and in addition to the plates and silverware, set out a dish of butter, the salt and pepper shakers, and a tray of fruit. Her duties accomplished, she then retired to the tent to read a magazine.

Presently, drawn by the hissing sound from a pot of potatoes which was boiling dry, she came outside again. Refilling the kettle, she glanced carelessly toward the dinner table.

"Why, Benny Wayne, you great big pig!" she cried accusingly. "You've eaten three bananas and I only bought a half dozen!"

Her brother, who was practicing fly casting at the nearby stream, turned to face her indignantly.

"Say, what are you talking about?" he demanded. "I didn't even touch your old bananas!"

"Three of them are gone from the tray."

"Then you must have eaten 'em yourself and forgotten about it."

"I'd be likely to forget about three bananas, wouldn't I? And I know Aunt Harriet didn't eat them—" Frances suddenly broke off and, as they both heard a strange chattering sound, gazed up into the nearby tree. "Oh, Benny, look there, will you!"

On one of the high branches sat a little monkey, calmly eating a banana.

Benny hurled aside his fishing rod and came scrambling up the bank.

"Well, what do you know about that!" he exclaimed. "I didn't suppose monkeys were native to Texas!"

"They aren't, silly," laughed Frances. "This little fellow must have escaped from his owner, or perhaps a zoo. He acts real tame."

It was true that the monkey did not seem in the least afraid. He blinked thoughtfully down at the boy and girl, and having finished the stolen banana, hurled the skin at Frances' feet.

"Why, the little scamp! I wish we could get him down here, Benny!"

"I'll offer him another banana. That might be tempting bait."

Benny brought the fruit and held it up for the monkey to see. In a moment the little fellow swung down from his perch, chattering excitedly to himself. As he tried to take the banana, Frances seized him

and was rather surprised when he did not struggle to get away.

"Isn't he a beauty, Benny?" she asked, stroking his back. "I've never seen one like him in a zoo."

The monkey was well fed and healthy in appearance. His rather long hair had a grayish-blue cast, his ears ended in silky tufts and his ringed tail curled gracefully over his head.

"He looks smart too," declared Benny. "I'll bet he understands what we're saying!"

The monkey, having finished the fourth banana, cocked his head knowingly, and blinked at the boy like a wise old man. Benny reached out and took him from Frances.

"He'll make a dandy pet, Fran."

"You act as if he were ours already, Benny. Of course, he must belong to someone near here. I wonder if those folks we saw in the Mexican car might not be his owners."

"Listen!" broke in Benny suddenly.

A crackling stick directly behind had warned him that someone was standing out of sight in the tall bushes just beyond the tents.

"Is that you, Aunt Harriet?" he called sharply.

At his words, the bushes parted and the same girl whom Benny and Frances had seen the previous day at the Lormsdale gasoline station stepped out into the little clearing. They were certain she had heard their conversation.

Before anyone could speak, the monkey leaped down from the boy's arms and turned a series of cartwheels on the ground. He then ran to the girl who perched him on her shoulder as she scolded softly:

"Cheta, you bad little monkey! Why did you run away from me?"

Remembering the rebuff she had received at the filling station, Frances stood somewhat stiffly without speaking. Benny was never troubled by sensitive feelings.

"Hello," he said quickly. "Is that what you call your monkey—Cheta?"

"Yes," replied the girl, moving nearer. She smiled shyly at Frances whose coldness instantly melted.

"We caught him stealing bananas," Benny went on. "He's a trained monkey, isn't he?"

"Cheta can do a great many tricks," the girl responded, speaking without a trace of an accent. "He knows a few which I never taught him, such as stealing fruit! Cheta is a Marmoset monkey," she added carelessly. "We brought him from Mexico with us."

Benny and Frances gazed quickly at each other, wondering whom the girl included by "we," and why she had come to Calverton Place. They felt certain now that she must be living with her Mexican companions at the little cottage, yet the association was a strange one, and they could not guess where Sidney Harmond fitted into the picture.

"Cheta is always getting lost," the girl remarked as an awkward silence fell. "He's a nuisance, but I adore him."

"You haven't lost anything besides a monkey?" Benny inquired significantly.

Frances knew that he was thinking of the flashlight and the revolver.

"Why, no," the girl returned, puzzled.

Fearful that Benny would say too much, Frances said quickly: "I remember seeing you at Lormsdale yesterday, but I didn't suppose we would meet again."

"I wasn't very polite," the girl murmured, and a flush spread over her cheeks. "You see, I've been so upset about everything."

"Are you camped close by?"

"Well, no, we're staying at the cottage."

To cover another awkward silence, Frances belatedly introduced her brother and mentioned her own name.

"I am Lolita Torres," the other girl said after a slight hesitation.

"And your home is in Mexico?" inquired Frances, unable to curb her curiosity.

"Yes, I came North this week with my servants, Juan and Carmen."

"We saw Sidney Harmond in your car, too," said Benny bluntly.

Lolita gave him a quick glance which could not be fathomed. "You are acquainted with Mr. Harmond?"

"He was out here this afternoon to talk with Uncle

Jim," returned the boy. "I thought maybe you saw him, too."

"Yes, I did. He came to the cottage." A troubled frown puckered Lolita's eyebrows as she shifted the monkey to a more comfortable position. "You are acquainted with Mr. Harmond yet you did not speak with him yesterday in Lormsdale."

"We didn't know who he was then," responded Frances. "He is Ralph Leigh's partner. Mr. Leigh sent Uncle Jim here to inspect the Calverton property which is to be sold."

"Mr. Leigh sent your uncle here?"

"Why, yes. But don't look so alarmed. Even if you aren't supposed to trespass, Uncle Jim won't drive you away unless you are damaging the property."

Lolita's face relaxed and she laughed. "And all the while I thought you were the trespassers! I was not entirely honest with you. When I told you my name I should have said, Lolita Torres Calverton."

"Calverton!" exclaimed Frances. "Then you are—that is, this place is yours!"

"It belongs to my mother, Donna Raquel. But what you say about your uncle disturbs me. You are certain that Mr. Leigh sent him here to inspect the property?"

"Yes, of course," answered Frances. "For some reason, he didn't wish Mr. Harmond to look after it."

"That is very strange," said Lolita in a low tone. "Very strange indeed, for Mr. Harmond brought me here. I thought he had been sent by Ralph Leigh."

CHAPTER VII

FOUND IN THE CUPOLA

"We really know very little about Mr. Harmond," Frances admitted frankly. "However, he told us only today that he felt rather provoked because Mr. Leigh had requested Uncle Jim to look after things here."

"If you ask me, I wouldn't trust that fellow very far," added Benny.

"Sidney Harmond has been most helpful," replied Lolita, coming instantly to his defense. "He assisted us across the border and escorted us here."

"Did Mr. Leigh know you were coming to Calverton Place?" inquired Frances thoughtfully.

"Mother wrote him two weeks ago. The letter was answered by Mr. Harmond who met us at the border."

"Odd that Mr. Leigh said nothing about it to Uncle Jim," commented Frances. "I wonder if he knew?" She was thinking that the letter might have been opened by Sidney Harmond and never relayed to the man in the hospital. "Do you plan to stay here long?"

Lolita's face became even more sober. "Only until I can find my brother, Andres. I am very worried about him. He came here over a month ago, and

except for one postal card received upon his arrival, we haven't heard a word."

"You mean he came to Calverton Place?" asked Benny.

"He started for here, and we know he reached Lormsdale. What happened to him after that is a mystery. Mother fears something has gone wrong, and for that reason she finally allowed me to start in search of Andres."

"So far you've found no trace of your brother?" inquired Frances.

"Not yet. Mr. Harmond has promised to assist me in every possible way. I placed the matter in his hands because I am unfamiliar with your country and how things are done here."

"Why, you speak and act as if you had been raised in the United States all your life," said Frances, smiling.

"Our *hacienda* is only a hundred miles from Mexico City, and I attended an English school there. One large city is very much like another."

"Yes, that's true," agreed Frances, although she could formulate no mental picture of Mexico's capital.

"I really have only a little Spanish blood," Lolita went on and her head lifted proudly. "My great-grandfather was General Calverton."

"We've been very much interested in the old Calverton house," said Frances, nodding toward the rooftop visible through a gap in the trees. "I suppose you are familiar with its history."

"Oh, yes, the house was built by my great-grandmother, Donna Paquina. She had a very unhappy life, and for that matter, so have all the Calvertons. Such an unfair attitude has been taken toward our family. Facts have been so distorted!"

Aware of the bitter note in the girl's voice, Benny and Frances waited expectantly. Lolita dropped Cheta on the ground, and seemingly in need of sympathetic listeners, resumed her story.

"You may have heard the account of General Calverton's disgrace. After leaving this country he held a high command in the Mexican army. During the unsettled period before Diaz came into power there were many revolutions. While the army occupied Xochimecijo, which is not far from the famous pyramids, a priceless collection of Aztec and Toltec relics was placed in my great-grandfather's keeping."

"What sort of relics?" questioned Benny, who was becoming deeply interested.

"Gold and silver ornaments, jade, and valuable pottery. Archaeologists would give a great deal to view that collection now. Unfortunately, it has been lost, and probably forever."

"What became of the things?" asked Benny, trying to hurry the story.

"During the revolution when it appeared that Xochimecijo might be taken by the enemy, General Calverton hid the collection. He did a very good

job of it, in fact, so good that no one has ever been able to find the place."

"Wouldn't your great-grandfather tell?" questioned Benny.

"He lost his life in battle and died before he could reveal the secret. Xochimecijo was saved, but the people forgot General Calverton's courageous sacrifice when the cache could not be found. They made grievous trouble for my great-grandmother, Donna Paquina, saying that she and her husband had shipped the gold and silver from the country for their own gain.

"The government in power at the time confiscated Donna Paquina's *hacienda* and a portion of her private fortune. She and her small son were compelled to flee across the border into Texas. Here in this isolated locality they built the strange octagonal house which you have seen."

"It certainly is a unique structure," remarked Frances. "I never saw anything like it before."

"I doubt that you ever will again. According to the story handed down in our family, Donna Paquina built the house as a monument, a rather grotesque one, to her husband. The cupolas and outside angles follow the plan of a fort where General Calverton once was in command."

Lolita paused and finally added in a slightly altered tone: "There is another tradition, too—the house is

supposed to hold the secret of what became of the long missing Aztec collection."

"Then your great-grandmother did bring the silver and gold with her when she fled from the country!" exclaimed Frances.

Lolita shook her head. "According to family tradition, she did not learn the hiding place until after she came here. She made the discovery while examining some of her husband's old papers."

"And did she turn the information over to the Mexican authorities?" asked Benny.

"Donna Paquina wrote a letter, offering to reveal the secret in return for her *hacienda* which had been confiscated. She received no satisfactory assurances, and so she kept the knowledge to herself. In later years the Calverton family regained possession of the stolen property by paying for it, but at that time Donna Paquina was very bitter. I might add that even today at Xochimecijo the popular belief exists that we Calvertons are living upon dishonestly gained wealth."

"And actually, no one has any idea what became of the cache?" inquired Frances reflectively.

"It may be hidden somewhere near the *hacienda,* but many persons have searched. Donna Paquina did not tell her son the secret, for even at the time of her death he was scarcely old enough to be trusted. She did hint to him that the information had been built into the octagonal house."

"Built?" demanded Benny alertly.

"Donna Paquina was a very peculiar old lady, and after her husband's death, perhaps not entirely rational. It is the belief of our family that in constructing the house she built some sort of hiding place where she secreted a paper which discloses the information. That is why the property has been held all these years. When Mother finally decided to offer it for sale, Andres pleaded with her to come here and make one last search."

"And you have heard nothing from him since?" commented Frances.

"Only the postal card. You can understand why I am so worried."

"Did you tell Sidney Harmond the reason your brother came to Lormsdale?"

"Why, yes, I did," acknowledged Lolita. "You think I made a mistake?"

"Well, as I said before, we really know nothing about Mr. Harmond," Frances replied evasively. "By the way, we saw a light in the cupola last night. I suppose it was you who visited the house."

Lolita regarded the girl with startled eyes.

"I didn't go near the place until this morning. You saw a light there?"

"We thought we did."

"Someone has been living in the cupola room too," added Benny quickly. "We found a—" He checked

himself, and deciding not to tell about the revolver, finished: "Fran picked up a curious piece of paper. What did you do with it anyway?"

"Uncle Jim had it last. Maybe he left it in the tent."

Frances darted away, and after ruthlessly going through the pockets of her uncle's gray suit, brought back the torn sheet of paper.

"This shield looks as if it might have a Mexican origin," she remarked, offering it to the girl. "Perhaps you know what it is."

"Indeed, I do!" cried Lolita in an excited voice. "This writing paper belonged to my brother! He had it made up for his exclusive use!"

"Then we know your brother must have reached Calverton Place!" exclaimed Frances.

"Yes, this is a vital clue. Where did you find the paper?"

"By the fireplace in the living room."

"You must show me the exact spot."

"We'll be glad to," offered Frances.

"Could we go there now? I have a key to the back door."

Benny and Frances were delighted at an opportunity to visit the octagonal house once more. Taking Cheta with them, the three crossed the clearing.

"Does the shield have a particular significance?" Frances inquired as they let themselves into the gloomy old dwelling.

"Only to our family. Near our *hacienda* there is

a temple wall upon which are painted a number of grotesque Aztec figures, representations of Feathered Serpents and the like, which have been there for ages. The Painted Shield always had a particular fascination for Andres. He copied the figure and had a replica of it embossed on his stationery. Also a book plate."

Frances led the way to the living room, pointing out the place where she had found the scrap of paper.

"Only Andres could have lost it," declared Lolita, her face troubled. "He visited this house, and perhaps discovered what he came to find—then something happened to him. Oh, I'm beginning to fear I'll never see him again!"

The girl's voice broke, and for the first time Benny and Frances realized that her casual manner had been mostly a pose.

"Why, it isn't likely that anything serious has happened to your brother," Frances said comfortingly. "He may have returned to Mexico by this time."

"I wish I could think so, but I can't. Something has gone wrong—Andres may have met with violence."

"Someone harmed him, you think?" Frances asked incredulously.

"I am afraid of it, terribly afraid. The Calvertons have many enemies."

"Do you know if your brother was armed?" Frances inquired.

"I don't believe he carried a weapon. At least, he had none when he left home."

Now more than before Benny and Frances were disturbed by the knowledge that a revolver had been found in the octagonal house, yet they felt that to tell Lolita about the discovery would only add to her uneasiness.

"Where is Cheta?" demanded the Calverton girl suddenly. "The little scamp has run off again."

She called to the monkey several times. When he did not come, the young people went into the *patio* to search. Lolita stood for a moment gazing up at the blue sky.

"Poor dear old Donna Paquina," she murmured. "She tried so hard to transport a bit of her native Mexico to Texas. This *patio* was built because she loved the warm sunshine. She imported the picture tiles, the statuary, and she brought trees and plants too, but they withered and died."

"Say, maybe Donna Paquina buried her treasure under the patio floor!" cried Benny, struck by a sudden thought. "This would make a dandy hiding place."

"Oh, Paquina had no gold," laughed Lolita. "She spent her little fortune in building this place. Despite rumors to the contrary, we do not believe the Aztec collection ever was brought over the border."

Frances had been wanting to ask a question, but scarcely knew how to frame it. She did not wish to give an impression of prying into her companion's private affairs. However, as they went upstairs to search further for Cheta, she spoke once more of Sidney

Harmond, inquiring if he were still at the cottage.

"Oh, no, he left a long while ago," replied Lolita. "Juan drove him into town where he had left his own car. It's funny—Juan dislikes Mr. Harmond even more intensely than you do."

"I didn't say I disliked Mr. Harmond," Frances declared quickly. "He made a point of being nice to us. Anyway, I don't suppose we'll be seeing him again for he's motoring back to Clarksville today."

"I didn't gain that impression," returned Lolita, pausing at the top of the stairway to catch her breath. "I understood him to say he might remain in Lormsdale for several days."

"We may have been mistaken," murmured Frances.

It occurred to her that Sidney Harmond deliberately had given false information to her uncle, but knowing that Lolita might resent another pointed suggestion that the man was untrustworthy, she wisely remained silent. Yet she kept wondering why the man had shown such an interest in the Calverton girl. She could not believe that it was because he wished to be helpful.

"What has become of Cheta?" Lolita asked impatiently. "He must be here somewhere."

They went from room to room looking for the monkey and finally found him in the cupola. As they entered they saw him stuff something down into a small hole behind a loosened baseboard.

"Now what do you have, Cheta?" Lolita demanded,

reaching down to pick him up. "You're the worst little thief I ever saw—always carrying off something!"

Benny thrust his hand down into the hole, and drew forth a man's checkered cap.

"Now where did that come from?" he asked in astonishment.

"Cheta must have found it in the house," murmured Lolita. "He had nothing when we came here."

"It couldn't be your brother's cap?" asked Frances as she examined the article of wearing apparel.

"No, he never had one like that."

"There's something else in this hole!" cried Benny. He had flattened himself on the floor so that he could reach far down into the opening. "It feels like a book. Yes, sir, that's what it is."

Triumphantly, the boy brought to light a small red leather notebook.

A startled exclamation excaped from Lolita's lips, and dropping Cheta, she fairly snatched the article from Benny's hand.

"It is Andres' memorandum book!" she cried. "See! Here is his name written in the front!"

With trembling fingers she turned the pages. There were many entries, for her brother had kept a detailed account of his expenses since leaving home. Meals, lodging and incidental items had been carefully listed. Then followed several blank pages.

Finally Lolita came upon a brief notation which

had been underlined twice. She read it aloud in a voice vibrant with suppressed excitement.

"San Paulo—*el mismo!*"

"What does that mean?" asked Benny eagerly.

"El mismo? The same—alike. San Paulo was the fort which my great-grandfather once commanded. Andres wrote the notation, for it is in his handwriting. Oh, if only I had the plans!"

"Plans? What plans?" demanded Benny, deeply puzzled.

"Why, the plans to the fort—San Paulo. But of course, you do not understand for I have not explained."

"We don't follow you at all," admitted Benny blankly.

"You know that this house was built to resemble the San Paulo fort," Lolita revealed in an excited voice. "Well, I believe Andres came here and made an important discovery. If I interpret this notation correctly, he made a shrewd guess as to where Donna Paquina cached the information sought by the Calvertons for so many years."

"Where?" asked Benny and Frances together.

"It's only a guess, but the place might be identical with a hidden vault in the old fort of San Paulo! If only I had the plans, we could test out the theory!"

CHAPTER VIII

ANDRES' DISAPPEARANCE

"WHAT became of the old San Paulo plans?" Benny inquired after a moment. "Were they lost?"

"No," answered Lolita, her manner calm again. "Andres brought the drawings North with him when he left Mexico. For weeks before he started here I would see him pouring over the papers, and I couldn't understand the reason for his interest. He must have thought even then that the two hiding places might be similarly located."

"I don't understand exactly what you mean by a hidden vault in the old fort," mentioned Frances thoughtfully.

"The hiding place was a unique feature of San Paulo. Many years ago the old fort was torn down, but originally it was octagonal in shape, and this secret vault, used for storing valuables and perhaps certain munitions, was built underground. Now Andres may have reasoned that when Donna Paquina erected this house according to the plan of the fort she may have constructed a similar vault."

"Did you ever see the plans?" asked Benny.

"Oh, I glanced at them once or twice. I was never very much interested."

"Can't you remember where the vault was located?"

"It was underground, somewhere within the walls of the fort, but my recollection is very hazy."

"Say, maybe the hiding place is under the tiled floor of the *patio!*" cried Benny reverting to his original theory. "That's where I'd guess it would be!"

"The *patio* was never a part of the original fort plan. As I remember, the vault had been built close to one of the octagonal walls—but don't ask me which one!"

"Isn't it possible that your brother made the notation, 'San Paulo—alike' in the notebook before he came here?" Frances suggested reflectively. "In that case, it wouldn't have great significance."

"From the way Andres underlined the words, I believe he had checked his theory and proven it true," declared Lolita. "But I'm not greatly interested in the hiding place at the moment. My purpose in coming here is to learn what became of my brother. Finding this notebook makes me feel even more worried than before!"

"It looks as if he may have lived in the cupola for awhile, at least," ventured Frances. "Someone ate a lunch here."

"Oh, this notebook is proof that Andres was here, and the sheet of writing paper gives us a date. What alarms me is the cap." Lolita turned it over in her

hand and frowned. "My brother couldn't possibly have worn it because the size is much too large."

"Someone besides your brother must have been here," Benny said, making an obvious observation.

"We have so many enemies," Lolita murmured nervously. "I am fearful Andres may have met with violence."

"Do you know of any person who would wish to harm your brother?" inquired Frances.

"No particular person, yet there are many Mexican peons who despise Andres, and myself as well, merely because we are Calvertons. They speak of us derisively as *Gringo,* slurring our North American blood."

"And these peons hate your brother enough to do him harm?"

"Under certain circumstances—yes."

"But why would they wait until he left Mexico?"

"The feeling against our family has been lying dormant until quite recently. Then a native who has much power in the community, fanned the old flames by making bitter speeches. When Andres left for Lormsdale we tried to keep his destination secret, but the rumor spread that he was coming here to recover the lost Aztec cache."

"Have you notified the authorities of your brother's disappearance?"

"No," replied Lolita briefly. "Mr. Harmond advised against it."

Behind the girl's back, Benny made a slight grimace,

for even the mention of Sidney Harmond's name had become distasteful to him. He considered Lolita rather naive to place so much trust in the man.

"How long has your brother been missing?" questioned Frances.

"He left home five weeks ago last Thursday."

"That doesn't seem so long."

"Andres did not expect to be away more than three weeks. And he brought very little money with him."

"Then it does look as if something had happened," admitted Frances soberly. "I suppose we should tell you this, even if it does increase your worry. Last night Uncle Jim found a revolver here."

"In this cupola?"

"No, it was lying on the floor of the north bedroom. I'll have him show it to you when we return to camp."

"Was there any indication of a struggle?"

"Everything was the same as it is now, Lolita. I can't help but think you make a mistake not to notify the authorities. After all, Mr. Harmond—"

"There is another reason," broke in Lolita. "For the present it would be very unwise to talk with the police. I must request that neither of you repeat what I have told you."

"We'll say nothing about it," Frances replied somewhat stiffly.

Lolita's tone had made it evident that she did not wish to discuss the matter further. Feeling slightly nettled, Frances turned to leave the cupola. Benny

captured the monkey and followed the two girls from the room.

As Frances stepped out on the balcony overlooking the *patio,* she suddenly drew back, sniffing the air suspiciously.

"Cigarette smoke," she whispered to her companions who had come up behind her.

Cautiously they peered down over the balcony. No one could be seen in the *patio* although a pale wisp of smoke still floated in the air above the ruined fountain.

"Who is there?" called Lolita sharply and repeated the command in Spanish. *"Quien es allí?"*

Receiving no answer, the young people waited a moment, and then Benny led the way down the stone steps. He glanced closely at the bushes and shrubs, satisfying himself that no figure lurked behind the tangled mass of foliage and vines.

Gaining courage, the three moved noiselessly from room to room, even peering down into the dark cellar. They could find no further trace of the intruder and were forced to conclude that he had left the house.

"After this I must take care to lock the doors," Lolita remarked uneasily as they left the premises.

Benny proposed that they all walk down to the road to see if a strange car might have pulled up there. As they moved briskly across the clearing, a man who was stout and short, dark of skin, and with stooping shoulders, was observed coming toward them.

"Why, it is Juan!" exclaimed Lolita. "He must have returned from town."

The Mexican servant gazed distrustfully at Benny and Frances, barely nodding his head as Lolita introduced them. Ignoring the boy and girl, he spoke in fluent Spanish to his young mistress who immediately chided him.

"Juan, you are impolite to use Spanish when my friends do not understand the language."

"I say nothing anyway," the man muttered in halting English.

"Did you take Mr. Harmond to Lormsdale, Juan?"

"Si, Senorita, he go to the hotel. Much better he return to Lormsdale and mind own business."

"Why, Juan," laughed Lolita and she dropped the monkey into his arms. "Aren't you in an unpleasant mood? Please take Cheta back to the cottage for me."

The man accepted the monkey, but without replying, turned away.

"Oh, by the way, Juan." Lolita grasped his arm. "You didn't by chance notice a car parked anywhere along the private road?"

Juan gave her a quick, slanting glance. He answered briefly: "No car."

"I don't suppose you saw anyone near the house either as you approached?"

Juan shook his head. Without giving Lolita an opportunity to ask another question, he retreated with Cheta. At least Frances and Benny gained the impres-

sion that he sought to escape, and their opinion altered not a whit when Lolita said apologetically:

"Don't mind Juan. Until one gets to know him well he seems rather rude and sullen. He hasn't approved of my actions at all since I came here."

Deciding that it was a waste of time to walk to the road, the young people returned to the Kellog camp.

"How good your supper smells!" declared Lolita as they drew near.

"Doesn't it?" responded Frances. She glanced at her wrist watch and was surprised to see that it was after six o'clock. "I guess Aunt Harriet came back in time to take care of things. You must stay and share the meal with us."

While Benny ran down to the river's edge to summon his uncle who was cleaning fish, she introduced Lolita and Mrs. Kellog. Both adults were astonished to meet a member of the Calverton family and they listened attentively as Lolita again told of her brother's disappearance. Mr. Kellog went to the tent for the revolver which had been picked up in the octagonal house and showed it to the girl.

"This weapon never belonged to Andres unless he purchased it after leaving home," Lolita declared, handling the revolver gingerly. "Is—is it loaded?"

"It was," returned Mr. Kellog, "but I removed the cartridges. One had been fired."

"Oh," murmured Lolita, handing back the gun.

"I imagine the best thing to do will be to turn it over to the police," remarked Mr. Kellog.

"No, please don't do that!" Lolita spoke almost sharply. "At least not yet."

Before Mr. Kellog could make any response, his wife announced that supper was ready. Suddenly aware that she had stayed a long while, Lolita sprang up from the camp stool, declared that she must hasten back to the cottage.

"Won't you stay and share pot-luck with us?" invited Mrs. Kellog cordially.

"Oh, Carmen will be expecting me," Lolita said, but when Benny and Frances joined in urging her to remain, she allowed herself to be persuaded.

The meal, while plain, was well cooked, and Lolita ate with a zestful appetite which very nearly matched Benny's.

"Everything is so good," she said, apologetically taking a third helping of meat. "Such a welcome change from Carmen's eternal tortillas and beans."

The Kellogs suspected, too, that the girl enjoyed their companionship, for even after the dishes had been washed and put away, she lingered to chat. She discussed with Mr. Kellog the possibility of selling Calverton Place and what price he thought the property might bring.

"I don't like to mention a definite sum," the former real estate man hedged. "It will be a problem to find a buyer at any price." Observing Lolita's crestfallen

glance he added hastily: "Oh, the place should sell eventually, but possibly not at its true value."

"The architecture is very bad, I realize," admitted Lolita. "And the property has been allowed to run down shamefully."

"I was thinking more of its location," commented Mr. Kellog. "Few persons would be willing to live so far from neighbors."

"Yet it seems a pity to tear the house down for the material in it. The imported tiles must be worth something, not to mention the heavy studded doors and the oak beams."

"My opinion isn't to be taken too seriously. As I told Mr. Leigh when he sent me here, I know nothing about real estate in this section."

"What you say sounds very reasonable. When Mother decided to sell the place I was afraid she might encounter difficulty."

"I shouldn't have discouraged you," replied Mr. Kellog. "Ralph Leigh is a clever real estate man, and he may find just the buyer for this place."

"I fear the person would have to be blind, deaf and dumb," Lolita said ruefully. She abruptly arose. "I must be going back to the cottage."

"Benny and I will walk with you," Frances offered when the girl could not be persuaded to remain longer.

"It's only a step."

"Nevertheless, you shouldn't go alone," Frances said firmly. "It would be foolish to risk it."

She slipped into a warm sweater and brought an extra one for Lolita. The night had grown chilly and after leaving the glow of the camp lights, it seemed very dark, for there were no stars to brighten the way.

"Carmen and Juan will wonder what became of me," Lolita remarked as she guided her companions toward the cottage. "They worry about me as if I were their child."

"Juan and Carmen are married?" inquired Frances curiously.

"Yes, Mother never would have allowed me to come here if they hadn't accompanied me. Juan and his wife have been with us ever since I was a child."

Soon the young people came within view of the cottage, but Lolita paused as she observed that the windows were dark.

"Looks like no one is there," commented Benny.

"They may have gone out to search for me. I hope I haven't caused them worry."

Lolita seemed to forget her companions. As if sensing that something was wrong, she quickened her step so that she was almost running when she reached the cottage. She pushed open the door.

"Carmen! Juan! Are you here?"

A low moan reached the ears of the three listeners. Benny flashed his light through the dark doorway. The bright beam illuminated a circle of floor and focused on the bound figures of Juan and Carmen.

CHAPTER IX

A VICIOUS ATTACK

HORRIFIED, the young people pushed into the cottage, stumbling over wrecked furniture strewn on the floor.

"Quick! A light!" commanded Lolita, as she bent down beside the moaning Carmen. "On the table!"

Benny rotated his flashlight about the room, only to see that the table had been overturned, the lamp smashed.

"There is an extra one in the kitchen cupboard," Lolita directed. Then, realizing that the boy never could find it, she abandoned Carmen and ran to search for it herself.

In her haste she knocked a bottle of syrup from the high shelf, and felt the sticky ooze flow down her dress front. Her hand touched the lamp and seized upon it. Now if she could only find a match—

Anticipating the need, Benny had found one in his pocket. He struck it on the wall, applied flame to the wick, and the yellow light flickered up.

The room showed evidence of a terrible battle. A chair had been shattered, a window smashed, and the contents of suitcases and boxes tumbled on the floor. Lolita and her companions scarcely noticed the dis-

order for they were more concerned with the two victims of the attack.

Carmen appeared more frightened than harmed, but her husband had received a severe beating. His face was bruised and bleeding. After Benny released him from his bonds he tried to raise himself from the floor, only to collapse again.

They lifted the man and carried him across the room to a couch. He made no complaint, but the stiff lines of his mouth, the ashen color of his cheeks, the haggard look in his eyes told them that he suffered intensely.

While Lolita ran to the kitchen once more for water and towels, Benny and Frances severed the thongs which bound Carmen, and helped her to her feet. Her right eyelid had been cut and showed signs of swelling; the left cheek was bruised, and she held her arm as if it pained her.

The Mexican woman was not a pretty sight with dark hair streaming down over her face. Sinking into a chair, she rocked to and fro, her wails becoming louder and shriller.

Returning from the kitchen with a basin of water, Lolita paused beside Carmen, lifting her arm to make certain it was not broken.

"Stop that wailing, Carmen!" she ordered sternly. "You are hysterical. Juan is hurt far more than you."

The woman's sobs gradually subsided and with somber eyes she watched while the young people minis-

tered first aid to her husband. Actually, Benny and Frances did little more than hold the wash basin and hand Lolita bandages, because their young companion had amazing skill. Frances followed her deft movements admiringly, for she had never been able to wrap a bandage without wasting yards and yards of gauze.

"Juan, who did this to you?" Lolita asked quietly.

The man did not reply, but his wife poured forth a torrent of Spanish, her voice rising shrilly again.

"Carmen says three masked men came here while she and Juan were eating supper," interpreted Lolita. "They made no demands, asked no questions, but boldly started searching through my personal belongings. Juan tried to stop them and was struck brutally on the head. When Carmen went to his assistance, she was thrown to the floor."

"A regular battle royal," commented Benny.

Carmen was talking again, and after listening, Lolita translated once more for her friends.

"She says she believes their attackers were men from our own country. Juan jerked the mask from the face of one of his assailants." Turning to the man on the bed, Lolita asked: "Did you get a good look at him, Juan?"

"No, Senorita," the servant mumbled. "Only see he had twisted mouth—so." Juan drew his lips into a grotesque grimace. "Then light crash to the floor."

"Do you know if they took anything from the cottage?"

"No, Senorita. They beat us so cruelly. I lose self for awhile until you come."

"He means he went unconscious," Lolita explained to Benny and Frances. "Are you feeling better now, Juan?"

"A little better, Senorita."

"Do you think we ought to get a doctor?" Frances suggested anxiously.

Hearing her words, Juan writhed on the couch and muttered something in his native tongue which made Lolita smile.

"Juan says he'll die for certain if we bring a doctor. Just the same, I'm not sure that he doesn't need one."

"At least, let me go for Aunt Harriet and Uncle Jim," suggested Frances. "They'll know what to do."

"Perhaps that would be best," Lolita agreed after a slight hesitation.

"You stay here, Fran," spoke up Benny. "I'll go back to camp."

He caught up his cap from the chair where he had dropped it, and started for the door. Lolita and Frances followed him outside.

"Be careful, won't you, Benny?" his sister said anxiously.

"Yes," added Lolita, "those brutal men may be lingering somewhere near."

"They wouldn't have any reason for attacking me," Benny returned carelessly. "What do you think they were after anyhow?"

"Something that doesn't exist," Lolita replied bitterly. "If they were Mexicans, as Carmen and Juan believe, then we've been followed here from Xochimecijo."

"Your guess is that those masked men think you know the location of the Aztec cache?" Frances questioned in a low voice.

"Why otherwise would they search through my belongings? They must believe I have an old paper which reveals the hiding place. Actually, no such clue exists."

"How about the plans of San Paulo?" demanded Benny.

"It was only a guess when I said that the hiding place in the old fort might be similar to one in the octagonal house. Anyway, Andres has the plans, not I."

"The men who came here may have thought they were in your possession," declared Frances.

"That's possible," admitted Lolita slowly. "It all seems rather fantastic, doesn't it? Oh, I wish Andres had never taken it into his head to come here! Even if he does succeed in finding the treasure, we will gain nothing save the good will of our countrymen, for we would turn everything over to the government."

A moan from inside the cottage reminded the girls that they were neglecting Juan and Carmen.

"Do be careful, Benny," Frances urged again, as she stepped back into the doorway.

"I will," he promised. "Better keep an alert eye yourselves, in case those fellows should return."

"We'll lock the door," declared Lolita.

Benny heard the key turn, and then he started at a swift pace across the clearing. Glancing in every direction, he could see no one, yet he felt uneasy as if he were being watched. "Nerves" he told himself, but he caught himself walking even faster.

The octagonal house was dark and forlorn, the boy observed in passing. No sign of anyone prowling about the premises. To all appearances, Calverton Place was as peaceful and deserted as upon the evening when first he had viewed it from afar, yet there was a subtle difference which Benny could not have expressed in words. It was as if he could *feel* a presence, a sinister something which waited, watched, and bided its time.

Shivering, Benny pulled his coat over his chest, and went on toward the camp. The warm, cheerful glow of Uncle Jim's electric lantern shone out like a beacon to guide him.

"Is that you, Benny?" called Aunt Harriet from the tent. "We were just going to bed. What made it take so long?"

"There's trouble a-plenty down at the cottage!" the boy cried, rather enjoying the startling effect of his words.

Mr. Kellog thrust his head beyond the tent flap, and in another moment Mrs. Kellog appeared, wrapped in a woolen robe.

"What is wrong?" she asked anxiously. "Where is Frances?"

Benny gave a dramatic account of what had happened to Juan and Carmen, explaining that his sister had remained with Lolita.

"Attacked and beaten by masked men!" exclaimed Mrs. Kellog in horror. "Are they badly hurt?"

"Carmen is all right, but Lolita isn't sure about Juan. She wants you to come and see how he looks to you."

"Something like this would happen when we're miles from a doctor—not to mention the police," cried Mrs. Kellog, disappearing into the tent. "I'll dress right away."

"Where in tarnation did I drop my shoes?" demanded her husband impatiently. "I had them in my hand a minute ago. Benny, bring the lantern over here, will you?"

The boy unhooked it from a nail which had been driven into a tree, and hung it on the steel post of the tent porch.

"I'm going on ahead," he called to his aunt and uncle. "You know the way."

"We'll be right along," came Mr. Kellog's muffled voice.

Benny started toward the cottage, but before he had gone half the distance made a sharp detour toward the road, wishing to see if an automobile might have been parked there. He was not particularly surprised to find the highway deserted, for he reasoned that the persons who had attacked Juan and Carmen would have made a quick get-away.

"But if they failed to find what they were after, it's a cinch they'll be coming back here again," he told himself.

He walked along for a short distance, playing his flashlight over the grass-clogged road. If there were any tire prints he could not find them.

The boy was brought up sharply by the sound of a crackling stick from the woods which bordered the private road. Turning his head quickly, he made out the indistinct figure of a man who crouched in the shadow of a giant tree at the timber's edge.

Benny felt himself grow weak all over, and he stood with every muscle frozen. Then in a bold voice which he scarcely recognized as his own, he shouted: "Come out of there, you!" and shot the beam of his flashlight squarely at the man.

He gained no impression of him, for instantly his own eyes were blinded. Two could play at the same trick. He was gazing directly into the beam of the other fellow's flashlight and it was more powerful than his own.

Benny snapped off his light, realizing that if his opponent were armed, he would become a perfect target. He darted sideways in the dark, eluding the pursuing beam. Moving noiselessly, he tried to steal closer to the tree.

A slight sound betrayed him, and instantly the other light was extinguished. A crashing of dry brush told Benny that the prowler had abandoned his place be-

hind the tree and was fleeing through the woods.

"Hey, you sneak! Come back here!" he shouted.

The man did not halt. Suddenly feeling very brave, Benny did not consider his next action. Impulsively and quite rashly he plunged into the woods.

The man was a fleet runner, more skillful than the boy in darting among the trees. Benny dropped farther and farther behind.

Suddenly he tripped over a vine and fell flat on his stomach. A cloud of wood smoke rose up into his face, choking him with its acrid fumes. His hands touched something hot and gritty.

Benny recoiled with a muffled cry of pain and frustration. He had stumbled into the smoldering ashes of an abandoned camp-fire.

CHAPTER X

BESIDE A HOLLOW LOG

SLOWLY, Benny picked himself up from the ground, nursing his burned fingers. It was useless to pursue the fleeing man further, for he could hear no noise in the woods. He had lost the fellow completely. Perhaps it was just as well, the boy reflected soberly, for to have kept blindly on might have meant that he would run into an ambush.

Had the man been one of the party which had attacked Juan and Carmen? And who had camped within the past few hours at this site? These and many other questions tumbled helter-skelter through Benny's mind.

He flashed the beam of his light about the tiny clearing. Nearby ran the same stream which flowed past the Kellog camp, the swift moving water splashing over the stones with a sound which was strangely soothing. A hollow log had been pulled up to the patch of smoldering ashes, providing a comfortable seat for the recent camper.

"Can't see anything tonight," the boy thought. "I'll come back in the morning and look around."

Tramping out a few red coals which had been stirred to life, he held his fingers in the cool water of the

stream for a moment, and then went back to the road.

During Benny's absence from the cottage the girls had helped Carmen to bed, and had straightened the disordered furniture. A check of Lolita's personal belongings disclosed nothing missing, leaving them more convinced than ever that the four masked men had failed to find what they sought.

Mr. and Mrs. Kellog had reached the cottage ahead of the boy, but they were so distressed by the attack upon Juan and his wife that it did not occur to them to ask why he had been delayed.

"I'll be glad to drive to Lormsdale after a doctor," offered Mr. Kellog. "The only thing is, I don't like to leave you folks here unprotected."

"It is a long trip in to town," replied Lolita, "and Juan insists he doesn't need medical aid. I believe we may safely wait until morning."

"No bones are broken," nodded Mr. Kellog. "You did a good job of patching him up, so I doubt if a doctor could do very much more."

While his uncle talked with Lolita, Benny drew his sister aside to report his adventure in the woods.

"Oh, it was foolhardy to chase that man," Frances chided, but with an admiring note in her voice. "Is he still around here do you think?"

"He must be."

"Then it's not safe for Lolita to remain at the cottage tonight. Juan is in no condition to protect her. You must tell Uncle Jim what happened."

The situation was discussed at considerable length by the Kellogs and Lolita. Since the cottage could not possibly accommodate everyone, a decision finally was reached to shift the Kellog camp to a site close by so that in the event of trouble, help would be at hand. Accordingly, the tents were struck down and carried to the new location. By ten o'clock, everything was in order once more, and the weary campers tumbled into their beds.

Several times during the night Mr. Kellog aroused, thinking that he heard someone moving stealthily in the darkness. He was glad he had taken the precaution to re-load the revolver under his pillow. Always when he peered out the tent flap everything appeared tranquil, and the hours passed without event.

In the morning, Cheta paid an impromptu visit to the camp, helping himself to food from the breakfast table. A little later Lolita, looking haggard and worn, came to report that Juan was feeling much better.

"It's really hard to believe anything occurred last night," Frances declared cheerfully, listening to the chirp of the birds. "Everything is so peaceful and quiet now."

"The lull before the battle," Lolita returned soberly. "Juan's poor face is a sight. I—I couldn't sleep for worrying about Andres. He may have been a victim of those same men."

"Don't you think you're making a serious mistake in failing to notify the authorities, Lolita?"

"Perhaps I am," the girl admitted reluctantly. "When I see Mr. Harmond today I'll ask his advice."

"You expect him to come here?"

"He said he might. I hope he does, because I'd like to tell him about what happened last night."

Frances started to speak and changed her mind. She thought Lolita very unwise in trusting Sidney Harmond, yet to make disparaging remarks would only invite a spirited defense.

After the Calverton girl had gone back to the cottage, the Kellogs held a quiet conference. They were all agreed that to leave the locality now would be quite impossible, for no one wished to abandon Lolita.

"Ralph Leigh sent me here to learn what is wrong, and I'd like to find the answer," declared Mr. Kellog, offering his plate for a third helping of buckwheat cakes. "I'll drive in to Lormsdale this morning and send him another wire."

Benny and Frances had planned to explore the camp site which had been discovered the previous night at the edge of the woods, but they now postponed the excursion, preferring to accompany their uncle. Arriving at Lormsdale shortly before noon, Mr. Kellog sent off a telegram to Mr. Leigh. He and Benny then went to the hardware store to buy rope while Frances filled a grocery order given her by both Lolita and Mrs. Kellog.

Coming out of the store, her arms loaded with paper sacks, the girl observed Sidney Harmond standing

directly across the street. He did not see her for he was talking with a well dressed, distinguished looking man of middle age, and they were deeply absorbed in their conversation.

Frances saw Mr. Harmond draw a discarded envelope from his pocket, and with a pencil sketch something on its blank side. The other man studied the paper soberly for several moments, nodded his head, and apparently made favorable comments regarding it. They both turned and walked up the steps of the First National Bank. Before entering the building, Mr. Harmond, who was smiling as if well pleased, carelessly crumpled the paper and tossed it into the gutter.

Impulsively, Frances crossed the street and picked up the envelope. A passerby stared curiously at her, so she dropped the crumpled ball into her grocery sack and did not examine it until she reached the parked car.

Carefully spreading out the paper on her knees, she smoothed the crinkles. At first she could make nothing of the crude drawing for it consisted of only a few lines. She thought it looked a little like a contour map such as geologists used, showing rivers and elevations of land. She was still puzzling over it when her uncle and Benny returned.

"Uncle Jim, what would you say this is?" she inquired, thrusting the paper into his hand.

He squinted at it briefly. "It means nothing to me."

"Could it possibly be a crude contour map of the Calverton locality?"

Mr. Kellog studied the paper with deeper interest. "Well, it might be, Frances. The river is located similarly, isn't it? And the high dome might represent the place where the octagonal house sets. Where did you get it?"

"From the gutter," Frances admitted shamelessly. "Sidney Harmond dropped it there. He had been talking with another man, and they were discussing this map."

"Say, maybe the land has a valuable mineral deposit!" exclaimed Benny.

Mr. Kellog smiled and shook his head. "It's not likely in this section of the country. We're perhaps too distrustful of Mr. Harmond."

"He's here for some purpose," Frances declared firmly. "And it's not to help Mr. Leigh or Lolita either!"

"I'm rather inclined to suspect the man does have an ax to grind at someone's expense," Mr. Kellog observed, staring again at the paper. "I'll keep this and study it more."

At Calverton Place again, Frances delivered the groceries which she had bought for Lolita.

"Bread, sugar, chocolate, eggs, bacon," she ran over the list. "I guess I remembered everything."

Juan came into the kitchen while they were putting away the packages. He moved slowly as if every

muscle pained him and his face was badly swollen and discolored.

"How are you feeling, Juan?" she inquired.

"Muy bien," he answered curtly, and with a glance which she could not interpret, sauntered out into the sunshine.

"What did he say, Lolita?" she asked curiously.

" 'Very well', which I fear is an untruth."

"Juan seems to have taken a violent dislike to me."

"He seems to dislike everyone these days," sighed Lolita. "I don't understand him at all. Even Carmen hasn't seemed herself since we came here. They are so silly and suspicious—"

"Not of us, I hope," Frances said quickly.

Lolita's laughter had a self-conscious, guilty ring. "Oh, no, of course not."

Frances said no more, but the conviction took root in her mind that for some reason Juan and Carmen did not regard her with favor, nor for that matter, any member of her party.

"It's an ungrateful attitude to take," she thought as she returned to camp. "Here, we're staying chiefly to afford Lolita protection, but I'm sure they're trying to poison her mind against us."

Benny was waiting when she approached the tents.

"Coming with me?" he demanded.

"Where?"

"To inspect that camp ground I stumbled into last night."

"I certainly don't intend to allow you to venture into the woods alone," Frances replied. "Let's ask Uncle Jim to go with us."

"He's not here, nor Aunt Harriet either. They went out on a field trip."

"A field trip?" Frances inquired, puzzled.

"They took the contour map with them. I guess Uncle Jim intends to scout around and see if he can find any gold nuggets lying loose."

"But he said he didn't think this locality possibly could have any valuable mineral deposit."

"Maybe he changed his mind," Benny returned with a shrug. "Anyway, he took the map. If you're coming with me, let's get started."

He led Frances down the road, and after a little uncertainty retraced his way through the woods to the tiny clearing by the stream.

"That's where I took my header," he said, pointing to the smear of cold gray ashes. "If I hadn't stumbled I might have caught that fellow."

"It's lucky you didn't," Frances responded severely. "Of all the rash acts!"

"The man was more afraid of me than I was of him," boasted Benny.

They glanced about, noticing that the long grass had been trampled, indicating that the former camper or campers had remained at the site for some little time. Benny found several discarded tomato cans and a

battered tin bucket which had been blackened by the fire, but no other objects.

"There's nothing of interest here," Frances remarked, seating herself on a hollow log. "This camp merely proves what we already know—that Calverton Place is far from being deserted."

Benny continued to roam about, his eyes on the ground. He hoped to find some object which might offer a clue to the identity of the campers.

As she waited, Frances idly kicked at the loose earth with the toe of her hiking shoe. She had turned up a sizable little pile of dirt before it suddenly occurred to her that the ground directly in front of her was much softer than at any other place near the log. The thought came to her that it had been disturbed recently.

Picking up a stick she began to prod at the ground, her excitement mounting as she found how easily it could be stirred.

"Benny!" she cried. "Come here!"

"Find something?" he demanded, hurrying over to the log.

"Doesn't it look as if someone had been digging here?"

"The dirt *is* loose," acknowledged Benny. Scorning a stick, he dropped down on his knees, and burrowed dog-fashion with his hands.

His fingers touched a firm, smooth object, and he gave a whoop of delight.

"There is something hidden here, Fran! I'll have it out in a jiffy!"

Benny began tossing up dirt at a furious rate, and in another moment he brought to light an oilskin covered packet.

"This couldn't have been buried here very long or it would have rotted," he said in awe, turning the curious little package over in his hand. "What do you suppose it contains?"

Frances opened her lips to speak, but no sound came. She stared beyond her brother, at a man who stood half hidden in the shadow of the trees.

CHAPTER XI

AN OILSKIN PACKET

BEFORE Frances could warn her brother, the man spoke, and his words fell like chips of steel.

"Drop that package, please. I have you covered."

Benny whirled around, so startled that involuntarily he allowed the oilskin packet to slip from his fingers. It fell at his feet by the log. He could not see the man clearly for the fellow took pains to keep half hidden behind a tree trunk.

"Now turn your backs and walk to the road!" commanded the cool voice. "Do not return."

"Go on, Fran," urged Benny, and then in a whisper added: "When you get to the trees, run like blazes!"

Frances gazed at him questioningly and moved hurriedly away.

"Both of you!" ordered the voice sharply.

"All right, I'm going, Mister," drawled Benny.

Quick as a flash he seized the oilskin packet and bolted across the clearing. Reaching the trees in safety, he zig-zagged among them, taking a different course from that of his sister. He could hear her crashing through the underbrush some distance away.

As he ran, Benny listened for the whine of a bullet,

and when it did not come, congratulated himself that he had guessed shrewdly. The man was not armed.

For a time he could hear the fellow pursuing, and then the thudding footsteps died away.

Benny reached the road an instant ahead of Frances. Seizing her hand he pulled her up the bank into the woods on the other side of the highway.

"Gee, but you're a slow runner," he panted.

"Did you save the packet, Benny?"

"Sure!" Grinning proudly, he held it up for her to see.

"You might have been shot."

"Oh, it was safe enough," Benny stated carelessly. "I figured that fellow didn't have a revolver or he would have come out into the open. Know what? I'll bet he was the same man who left his weapon in the octagonal house!"

"He didn't talk like a Mexican," Frances returned. "Maybe the packet really belonged to him."

"Well, it belongs to us now," chuckled Benny. "I guess it's safe to stop and see what it is."

They paused and listened. Hearing no sound, they decided they were not being followed, so allowed themselves a moment of rest. Eagerly Benny removed the oilskin wrapping from the packet. Inside were several folded sheets of heavy paper, yellow with age.

Dropping down on his knees, the boy spread them out on the ground.

"Drawings," he murmured in disappointment.

"There's some writing, but it's entirely in Spanish."

"Benny, don't you realize what these are?" exclaimed Frances, peering over his shoulder. "We've found the plans of the octagonal fort, San Paulo!"

"Jeepers!" breathed the boy in awe. "You're right, Fran! Say, is this luck, or is it luck?"

Thoroughly excited by their discovery, the girl and boy poured over the drawings. A hasty inspection did not reveal the location of the secret hiding place which Lolita had mentioned.

"If only we could read Spanish, we could tell more about it," muttered Benny in disgust.

"Let's take the plans to Lolita. They're her property anyway."

Benny carefully folded the papers, replacing them in the oilskin wrapper, then they hurried on through the woods to the cottage. Approaching, they saw Lolita standing beside the open window, and never dreaming that she might have a visitor, Benny shouted his good news.

"We've found 'em, Lolita! We've found the plans to San Paulo!"

The door stood half open. Benny and Frances burst into the living room, and then stopped short as they saw Sidney Harmond. They were so taken by surprise that they could not hide their dismay.

"What is this you have found?" the man inquired, smiling at their confusion.

"Why, nothing," muttered Benny.

"We didn't mean to intrude," added Frances hastily. "We'll come back later, Lolita."

"No, please stay. What were you saying about the San Paulo plans?"

Benny and Frances were sorry they had revealed their discovery to Sidney Harmond, yet from the way he eyed the oilskin package in the boy's hand, they suspected that already he knew the significance of the drawings. Benny thumped the packet down on the table in front of Lolita.

"There they are," he said.

"Oh, Benny, where did you find them?"

"Buried in the woods," the boy answered briefly.

Lolita unfastened the wrappings, and hastily turned through the various pages.

"Yes, these are the same plans which my brother brought North with him! But why were they buried in the ground? What has become of Andres?"

Mr. Harmond walked over to the table, and examined the drawings with an interest which Benny and Frances resented.

"Your brother probably learned the significance of the plans," he said to Lolita. "He may have disposed of them to prevent others from gaining possession. I judge that the vicious attack upon your servants was inspired because certain persons believe the papers are in your hands."

"That is true," Lolita acknowledged slowly. "It is my opinion that these drawings when properly inter-

preted may reveal the secret hiding place of Donna Paquina's octagonal house."

"Then I suggest that you look over the papers, and allow me to take them to Lormsdale when I go. If your theory is correct, they should be kept in a safety deposit box."

Benny and Frances frowned at the proposal, and when Lolita glanced questioningly toward them, tried to signal their violent disapproval.

"If the plans are kept here, you may be the target of another attack," Sidney Harmond went on smoothly. "You surely do not wish a repetition of what occurred last night?"

"No-o, of course not."

"Then I urge that you allow me to take them, Miss Calverton. For that matter, it is not safe for you or your servants to remain in this isolated locality. Why not shift your headquarters to the Lormsdale hotel?"

Lolita shook her head. "I intend to stay here until I have found some trace of Andres. I can't explain it so you will understand, Mr. Harmond, but I *feel* that he is near."

"As you wish," the man replied with a shrug.

"Mr. Harmond," ventured Frances suddenly, "don't you think it might be advisable to notify the authorities of Andres' disappearance?"

He regarded her with a cold stare. "On the contrary, I should consider it most unwise."

"But why?" demanded Benny bluntly.

"There is something I haven't told you," said Lolita when Mr. Harmond did not speak, "about Andres—"

"We didn't mean to be prying," Frances interposed quickly.

"No, I understand. You may as well know the truth and then you will realize why it is difficult to go to the authorities. Andres had trouble with the Immigration officials. His papers were in order, but apparently, someone had lodged false information about him, hoping to prevent him from coming here.

"Andres was determined to make the trip anyway. He slipped over the border at night. At least that was his plan, and I know he arrived safely at Lormsdale."

"I see," said Frances reflectively. "That does put the matter in a different light."

"The authorities might be able to help locate Andres, but if they found him, he would be arrested," went on Lolita. "I have thought, too, that he might be hiding out somewhere, knowing that he is being sought for illegal entry into this country."

While the girl was speaking, Juan appeared in the outside doorway, Cheta perched on his shoulder.

"Come in, Juan," invited Frances, as the servant hesitated.

The Mexican stared steadily at Sidney Harmond and did not move from the doorway. To cover an awkward silence which fell, Lolita went over and took Cheta from him. The monkey chattered in disapproval.

"You're a touchy old thing today, Cheta," Lolita

scolded. "Why, what is the matter with you anyway?"

The monkey had caught sight of Mr. Harmond and immediately went into a seething rage. He chattered in a high-pitched voice and bared his little white teeth. The presence of the man irritated the small creature to the point of paroxysm. Leaping down from Lolita's shoulder to the table, he acted as if he might attack him.

"Why don't you take that little beast out of here?" Mr. Harmond demanded. "I can't stand the infernal noise!"

As Lolita sought to capture him, Cheta leaped up on the long mantel above the fireplace. There he continued his chatterings, but in a slightly subdued voice.

"I don't know what is the matter with him," Lolita declared apologetically. "He never acted this way before. Hush, Cheta, or I'll lock you in the closet!"

In the midst of the commotion, Benny and Frances became aware that Juan, who still stood in the doorway, was beckoning to them. They saw that he wished them to step outside the cottage.

Benny immediately dodged out the door. A moment later, observing that Lolita and Mr. Harmond were occupied with Cheta, Frances quietly followed.

"What do you want, Juan?" Benny asked the servant. "Why the secretive air?"

"You come to road," the man urged. "He—" Juan jerked his head toward the cottage. "—he leave car on main highway instead of drive up private lane."

"There's no law against that," said Benny.

"Another man in car," returned Juan curtly. "Man whose mouth twists—so."

"The fellow who beat you?"

"Si, senor. You go. See for yourself! I show you."

Before the three could start away, Lolita called impatiently through the open window:

"Juan, where are you? Come here and help me capture Cheta!"

"We'll go down to the road alone, Juan," whispered Benny. "Where is the car?"

"By gate."

As Benny and Frances hurried down the private lane they had many comments to make, all unfavorable to Sidney Harmond. If Juan were right in saying that the man with the twisted mouth was at this moment waiting in the car, then it would seem that Harmond had conspired in the brutal attack against the two servants.

"I don't trust that fellow—never did," muttered Benny. "He'll get those plans away from Lolita, too—wait and see!"

"I wish we had never shown them while he was there. I wanted to warn Lolita, but what could I say?"

"Oh, our hands are tied," Benny admitted gloomily. "But it's a shame, after the risk I took to save them from that tough fellow in the woods."

"At least I hope Lolita examines the drawings carefully before she turns them over to him," sighed Frances.

Rounding a bend, they came within view of the massive stone posts which marked the entrance to the main road. Sidney Harmond's blue car stood just outside the closed gate.

"Looks empty to me," observed Benny.

"I don't see anyone," agreed Frances.

They approached cautiously, scrutinizing the bushes bordering the lane for any sign of movement. Reaching the car, they confirmed that it was deserted.

"Juan must have made a mistake," Benny said in disgust. "He's a queer fellow anyway."

"He's never liked us. I was surprised when he called us from the cottage. You don't suppose he wanted to get us out of the way?"

"I never thought of that, Fran!"

"He acted sincere enough, and it is queer that Mr. Harmond didn't drive all the way up the lane. Still, there's a possibility Juan may be working to help Harmond, and if so, he could have used the car as an excuse to get us away from the cottage."

"We were cramping Harmond's style a lot," Benny nodded. "With us gone, it will be much easier for him to persuade Lolita to give him the San Paulo plans."

"Let's get back there as fast as we can and see what has happened," urged Frances.

Feeling that they had been tricked, the boy and girl ran back up the lane, not slackening their pace until they came within sight of the cottage.

"Harmond must still be there, or we'd have met

him," Benny commented. "Don't let on we think anything is wrong."

They entered the cottage, observing that both Cheta and Juan had disappeared. Lolita and Mr. Harmond were still talking, but they broke off their conversation upon seeing the boy and girl.

"Where in the world did you go?" Lolita inquired.

"Oh, just down the road," Benny answered evasively.

Lolita did not press the matter, and Mr. Harmond turned as if to leave.

"I thought you would see it my way," he remarked to Lolita. "The plans will be well taken care of, I assure you."

The man walked to the table and picked up the oilskin wrappings. He shook them, and a bewildered expression came over his face.

"Why, where are the drawings?"

"They were on the table a moment ago," Lolita declared. "I haven't touched them."

Mr. Harmond looked on the floor, and then his gazed traveled to Benny and Frances.

"You're responsible for this!" he accused wrathfully. "You took those plans!"

"We've not even been here," protested the indignant Frances.

"That's why you sneaked out the way you did!" Mr. Harmond cried, unable to control his temper. "You took the papers and hid them somewhere!"

"Like fun we did!" exclaimed Benny. "You prob-

ably have them tucked up your sleeve this minute!"

"Please—" pleaded Lolita in a distressed voice. "These accusations are so silly. The papers must be here. I am sure no one has taken them."

"Then where are they?" demanded Mr. Harmond in a milder tone.

"Perhaps I picked them up and laid them somewhere, although I don't recall doing so."

A thorough search was made of the room, but the missing papers were not found. Sidney Harmond's anger had been so spontaneous and genuine that Benny and Frances could not believe he had taken the plans. It occurred to them that Juan might know something about the matter, yet they hesitated to make a direct accusation.

"Well, I guess they're gone," Mr. Harmond said at length. "I am sorry to have lost my temper, Miss Calverton, but it was important to keep possession of those plans."

"I feel very badly about it," Lolita returned, her eyes downcast. "It's simply unexplainable."

"I'm not so sure of that," responded the man, glaring at Benny.

"Say, listen, you can't hang it on us!" cried the boy, his anger blazing again. "If you want to know where we were, I'll tell you!"

"Benny!" remonstrated Frances, but the boy could not be stopped.

"We went down the lane to see why you parked your

car by the gate instead of driving up here! We wanted to find out whom you brought with you!"

Mr. Harmond's face turned white. Slowly little red spots broke out on either cheek. His eyes flashed, but he managed to keep his voice controlled as he spoke.

"You are an insolent little pup! I knew you and your sister were trying to prejudice your uncle against me, but because of Mr. Leigh I tried to ignore it. Now you have gone a bit too far. I wash my hands of the whole affair!"

Mr. Harmond strode to the door, and halting there, faced Lolita.

"I'll not be back again," he said coldly. "As to that matter we discussed, if you make up your mind, you may reach me for the next three days at the Lormsdale Hotel."

And with a curt nod, the man went out the door, closing it firmly behind him.

CHAPTER XII

A CONTRIBUTION BY CHETA

"Oh, Benny, why couldn't you have controlled your tongue?" wailed Frances.

"I don't care," the boy said stubbornly. Then seeing the hurt expression on Lolita's face, he amended: "Well, I couldn't help saying it—I'm sorry, 'Lita."

"It's all right," she said, trying to smile. "Mr. Harmond really was upset about a number of things. First Cheta annoyed him and then the plans disappeared. Juan was rude to him. I'm ashamed of the treatment he received, especially since he came here to make me an offer."

"An offer?" inquired Frances quickly.

"He has found a buyer for Calverton Place."

"I'll bet he's not offering very much," Benny said.

"Five thousand dollars."

"For nearly a hundred acres of land?" inquired Frances, lifting her eyebrows.

"It doesn't seem a great deal, but the house is practically worthless. Your uncle said it might be impossible to find a buyer at any price."

"I know," admitted Frances reluctantly.

"Mother expected to get more, but of course, she didn't realize conditions here."

"It really isn't up to Mr. Harmond to sell the property," Frances said slowly.

"Oh, he mentioned that, but he wishes to help me—or he did until he came here today."

"I'm sorry if I messed things up," Benny apologized again. "It made me hot under my collar when he accused me of taking those plans."

"What will you do about selling?" Frances asked Lolita.

"Mother owns the property so it is up to her to decide. I'll wire her today."

"And if she agrees to sell, then what about the secret hiding place?"

"I had thought we could search for it before the property is turned over to the new owner," Lolita replied. "Now that the plans are gone, everything is changed."

"Who is the buyer, Lolita?"

"Mr. Harmond didn't tell me his name. And he strongly advised me not to discuss the matter with anyone."

"He must be afraid you'll be instructed not to deal with him," Frances observed shrewdly.

"I gained the impression he thought Mr. Kellog would feel offended."

"Mr. Harmond seems almost too obliging," Frances stated dryly. "What do you suppose became of the plans?"

"I can't figure it out. They were here on the table when Juan came in to get Cheta. He locked the monkey in the closet to keep him quiet. I ought to be letting him out now."

Lolita crossed the room to open the door of the closet. Blinking at the bright sunlight, Cheta came out of his prison, a chastened, subdued little monkey.

"You behave yourself now," Lolita began severely. She broke off to exclaim: "Benny! Frances! Look at this, will you?"

"Now what?" demanded Benny.

"Papers scattered all over the closet! *Our missing plans!*"

"Cheta took them from the table?" cried Frances in disbelief.

"He must have." Lolita bent down to scoop up the sheets from the floor.

"But Juan surely would have seen him take the packet—"

"One would think so," agreed Lolita. "I'll talk with Juan when he comes back. At any rate, we have our plans again! I'll run and catch Mr. Harmond before he drives away."

"Oh, must you tell him?" Frances asked. "Why not wait until you've had a chance to look them over."

"Perhaps that would be better," Lolita acknowledged. "Well, let's see what we can discover right now!"

She spread the papers flat on the table, and they drew

up chairs. For an hour they poured over the drawings, trying to associate the octagonal angles of the ancient fort with those of Donna Paquina's strangely constructed house.

"Here is the hidden vault of San Paulo," Lolita declared, pointing to the map. "It was located on the same side of the fort as the prison cells. From the top of the page, three angles to the right."

"How would that correspond to Donna Paquina's house?" mused Benny. "Wouldn't it put the hiding place about where the big chimney was built?"

"It would depend upon whether Donna Paquina faced her house the same as the fort. If she did, the hiding place might be somewhere near the fireplace."

Frances stared at the page of drawings a moment and then said quietly:

"Lolita, I wonder if your brother didn't adopt exactly the same line of reasoning?"

"Why, what do you mean?"

"Remember, we picked up that paper bearing the painted shield by the fireplace. He must have searched there soon after he reached Calverton Place."

"Let's go to the house and see what we can find!" cried Benny who was impatient for action. "We're losing a lot of time."

"We may be too late," said Lolita, who had followed Frances' thought that Andres already had preceded them in the discovery of the hiding place.

She folded up the plans in the oilskin wrapper and placed them in her pocket. Leaving Cheta behind, the three friends crossed the clearing to the octagonal house. There they found Mr. and Mrs. Kellog sitting on the front steps, resting from their long tramp over the grounds.

"We met Sidney Harmond a little while ago," remarked Mr. Kellog. "Something seemed to have displeased him for he barely spoke to us."

"That something may have been Benny," laughed Frances.

She was glad when Lolita spoke lightly of the disagreement with Harmond, and confided to Mr. Kellog the cause of the difficulty. The San Paulo plans were spread out on the porch for him to see.

"I can't tell a thing about them without my glasses," he said regretfully. "But this is all vastly interesting."

As Mr. Kellog talked with Lolita, Frances observed Juan cross the clearing. He stared at the little group on the porch with an intensity which drew the girl's speculation. Without coming near the house, the servant entered the woods to the right hand side of the road.

"We should warm him not to go there," Frances thought, realizing that Juan might encounter the same man who had chased Benny and herself.

She started to break in upon Lolita's conversation, and then pressed her lips firmly together. For all she

knew, Juan might be intending to meet someone. Certainly his actions had been suspicious from the very first.

As her attention came back to Lolita again, she heard the girl say to Mr. Kellog:

"Then you believe that five thousand dollars would be a fair offer for the property?"

"I am not advising you to sell," Mr. Kellog replied hastily. "There is more to this affair than meets the eye. So far I've been unable to figure out why the place would be so desirable to anyone."

"Maybe Harmond's friend believes the land has a valuable mineral deposit," suggested Benny. "That map—"

"There is no evidence to support such a theory in my opinion. However, I thought I might drive into Lormsdale and talk with someone familiar with this particular section of country."

"I'll go with you, Jim," announced Mrs. Kellog as her husband arose from the steps. "That is, if you think it will be safe to leave the children alone."

"Say, we're not children," protested Benny indignantly.

Frances considered telling her aunt and uncle about the man who had been seen in the woods, but she knew if she did they immediately would abandon their plan of driving into Lormsdale. Accordingly, she remained silent.

"I wonder if I could ask you to do me a favor?" Lolita requested Mr. Kellog.

"Certainly. Groceries from town?"

"No, I thought I would send Mother a wire, asking her if she is willing to sell the place to Mr. Harmond's friend."

"I'll be glad to take it for you," Mr. Kellog offered.

Lolita composed the message, and a few minutes later Mr. and Mrs. Kellog drove away. The young people then turned their attention once more to their own absorbing problem.

"I'm afraid Uncle Jim doubted that the octagonal house contains a hiding place," Frances remarked as they unlocked the door and went into the empty dwelling. "Otherwise, he would have stayed and helped us search."

"Andres' theory may have been wrong," Lolita admitted, "but others seem to share it. Otherwise, Juan and Carmen would not have become the target for such a vicious attack."

Benny had brought a hammer with him, and while Lolita and Frances devoted themselves to the plans once more, he went systematically over the fireplace chimney, tapping each brick. He found several which had been loosened.

" 'Lita, either your brother or some other person has been here ahead of us," he announced. "Anyway, there's no sign of a cavity."

"Then this can't be the right place," declared Lolita, refusing to be discouraged. "We might try the basement at the same location."

"I'll get my flash," Benny offered eagerly.

He ran back to camp, noticing as he passed the Calverton cottage that Carmen was loading a box into the battered car which had brought Lolita from Mexico. He thought nothing of it at the moment, and finding the flashlight, hastened back to the octagonal house.

"I hate to go down into that dark hole," Frances shuddered as her brother opened the cellar door.

"Afraid of the dark?" he jeered.

"After what has happened here, I think we all have good reason to be cautious."

"I'll go ahead and drive out all the rats, mice and bogey men," joked Benny.

Before he could start down the stairway, Lolita placed a detaining hand on his arm.

"May I see your flashlight, please?"

"Sure." Benny handed it over, and then it dawned upon him why she had made the request. "It's not yours is it, 'Lita?"

"No, but it looks very much like one my brother owned."

"Maybe it does belong to him," Benny returned in a slightly crestfallen voice. "I found it."

"Where, Benny?"

"Lying on one of the stone posts down by the gate. You keep it."

"No, it's yours for the time being anyway," Lolita insisted, handing it back to him. "Seeing an object which had belonged to Andres just gave me a queer feeling."

"I don't like to keep it—"

"Please do, Benny. Now lead the way and we will follow."

Benny snapped on the light and moved cautiously down the steep stairway. He flashed the beam about the dark brick walls which were unrelieved by any window.

"Watch out for that third step," he called to the girls. "It's half-rotted away."

Frances followed next behind her brother, recoiling as an unseen silken cobweb caressed her face and clung.

"Are you sure there are no rats down here, Benny?" she asked uneasily.

"Whish! Here comes a big fellow at you now, Fran!" He gave her a playful pinch on the ankle.

"Benny Wayne, stop that!" Frances screamed, pushing him away.

"Quiet!" commanded Lolita in a tense tone.

Benny and Frances froze into statues, listening. They could hear no unusual sound.

"What was it, 'Lita?" whispered the boy after a long moment of waiting.

"I—I thought I heard someone walking upstairs," Lolita murmured tensely. "I guess I must have been mistaken."

"If Benny doesn't quit acting silly, we'll all be nervous wrecks," Frances said irritably. "No more funny business now!"

"We have serious work to do," added Lolita. "That flashlight battery may not last very long, Benny."

"Okey doke," he agreed amiably. "No more rats."

"Where shall we start?" asked Frances, looking about.

"Let's first check directly beneath the fireplace," suggested Lolita.

While Benny held the flashlight, the girls began the tedious task of examining the walls. So intent did they become upon their work that no one heard a creaking sound overhead. And no one noticed as a man's shadow darkened the open doorway at the head of the cellar stairs.

CHAPTER XIII

THE PICTURE BRICK

UNAWARE that alert eyes watched their every move, Benny and the two girls went methodically on with their task.

"Say, take a look at this brick, 'Lita," Benny sang out, calling her attention to one which fitted into the wall above their heads. "It has a little chip on the corner as if it might have been marked on purpose."

He turned the full beam of the flashlight on the brick so that the girls might see for themselves.

"It does have a chipped place!" cried Lolita, peering upward.

"And this would be just about the right location, too, according to the plans!" exclaimed Frances jubilantly. "Benny you have eyes like a cat!"

"Also a brain which never sleeps," he chuckled. "We need something to stand on. I'll see what I can find."

He went to explore the adjoining room, leaving the girls for several minutes in darkness. They huddled together, rather ashamed of their nervousness.

"This place is as gloomy as a medieval dungeon," Frances whispered. "I'll be glad when we get back into the sunshine again."

"Hurry, Benny!" Frances called impatiently.

"Coming."

The boy reappeared with the flashlight, dragging a large and very dirty box which he had found. He placed it against the wall.

"Careful when you stand on it," he advised Lolita. "It might give away."

Lolita mounted the box, testing her weight. Satisfied that it would hold her, she examined the chipped brick.

"It's loose!" she cried jubilantly.

"Then maybe we've located the hiding place at last!" cried Frances, jumping up and down in her excitement. "Oh, I'm afraid to hope."

"You seem to be doing a pretty intense job of it," chuckled Benny. "Say, that's my foot you're on now!"

He handed up the hammer to Lolita who tried to pry out the brick.

"Can't you get it, 'Lita?"

"Not yet, but I'm sure it was intended to pull out."

"Let me try," pleaded Benny.

Lolita obligingly stepped down from the box and allowed the boy to take her place. Digging his fingernails into the sides of the brick, he pulled it an inch at a time.

"She's coming!"

"Oh, Benny," breathed Lolita, "it's too wonderful to be true! To think that after all these years we would learn Donna Paquina's secret!"

"We haven't learned it yet," said Benny. He stepped down from the box.

"What's the matter?" gasped Frances.

"Nothing. Can't a fellow be chivalrous? I just want 'Lita to be the one to lift out the brick. It will come easy now."

"That's very thoughtful of you, Benny," returned Lolita, touched by his generosity. "Well, now to learn Donna Paquina's secret!"

Stepping up on the box again, she lifted out the brick from the wall. As Benny flashed his light into the cavity, they all saw that it extended back into the earth and had been cemented over, making a tiny moisture proof vault.

"We've found the hiding place all right!" cried Frances.

Lolita thrust her hand and arm into the opening and groped about.

"Why, there's nothing here," she murmured incredulously.

"Nothing at all?" demanded Frances. "Not even a paper?"

Lolita did not answer for a moment as she explored every inch of the cavity.

"Not a thing," she announced at last.

"Oh, that's too mean!" exclaimed Frances. "Do you suppose your brother or some other person was here ahead of us?"

"Seems to me the brick would have lifted out easier

if it had been removed recently," Benny said gloomily. "Donna Paquina just pulled a fast one on us, that's all!"

"It's too disappointing!" Lolita cried, and in sudden anger she flung the brick on the floor.

"Now you've done it," observed Benny.

The brick had broken squarely in the middle.

"I don't care," said Lolita, climbing down from the box. "I feel like smashing every brick in this old cellar."

Frances began to laugh. "You're such a tranquil person, Lolita, I didn't suppose you ever lost your temper."

"I have a violent one when it is aroused. And I'm simply seething now! Why did Donna Paquina go to all the trouble of building a secret hiding place, and then leave it empty?"

"Perhaps something was there originally," suggested Frances.

"I doubt it. Donna Paquina was such a queer person, and she may only have imagined that she knew the location of the Aztec cache."

"Might have known it would turn out this way," muttered Benny. He gave the broken brick a savage kick with the toe of his shoe.

Frances noticed then that it had separated into two even sections, not rough and jagged as one would have expected it to break.

"We can fit the brick back into the wall," she said, stooping to pick up the twin pieces.

"I suppose we should," agreed Lolita. "Whoever buys this house won't appreciate having the foundation mutilated."

Frances mounted the box with the two sections of brick in her hand. She fitted the first neatly into place, and then feeling a heavy crust on the face of the second piece, curiously examined it.

"Benny, your flashlight!" she requested.

"Now what have you found?" he demanded without great interest.

"See this!" she exclaimed excitedly. "I thought it was peculiar the brick broke squarely in the middle! Don't you see, it's really two bricks which had been fastened together!"

"So what?" asked Benny. "Just another of Donna Paquina's silly ideas."

Frances jerked the other section of brick from the wall and stared at it under the light.

"Now this is really *queer,*" she murmured in awe. "We may have found something after all."

Jumping down from the box, she held the inside surface of the brick so that her companions could see. On its face appeared a crudely drawn shield bearing the likeness of a mythical war god.

"The painted shield!" cried Lolita.

"Isn't that the same figure which was on your brother's stationery?" demanded Benny.

"Yes, he took the original from the wall of an ancient Aztec temple which stands near our home."

"Then he must have been here and left his sign on the brick—" Benny began, but Lolita cut him short.

"No, no! This drawing on the brick is very old. Donna Paquina inscribed it, knowing that only a member of the family would understand. She has revealed the hiding place of the lost Aztec riches!"

"It's still as great a mystery to me as ever," murmured Benny.

"Let me see the brick again," Lolita requested, taking it from Frances' hand. "Yes, just as I thought, the terraces are shown!"

"Terraces?" asked Benny in bewilderment.

Lolita indicated several lines drawn beneath the shield, which formed three broad steps.

"The Aztec temple is located at the summit of a great pyramid," the girl explained in a vibrant voice. "One ascends by steps and there are five terraces. At each level there are scattered decorations, painted figures which have been nearly obliterated by weather and age. Some were restored a number of years ago. The Shield appears on each terrace."

"Then this brick tells you what, Lolita?" asked Frances eagerly.

"That the Painted Shield marks the place where General Calverton hid the gold and silver entrusted to his guardianship. And since the figure appears many times on the pyramid, the hiding place must be on the terrace indicated by these lines."

"How many steps are there?" asked Benny, studying the drawing. "The lines are pretty dim."

"Listen!" warned Frances, gripping his hand.

The three were electrified by the sound of a creaking stairway board.

Whirling about, Benny turned his flashlight beam toward the steps, holding his hand high. He caught only a fleeting impression of a shadowy, crouching figure, before a long line snaked out to twist the flashlight from his grasp. It crashed to the floor and was extinguished, leaving them in darkness.

CHAPTER XIV

LOCKED IN THE CELLAR

In discussing it later, Benny and the two girls had no clear recollection of what happened next. They were thrown into complete panic as they heard someone move with cat-like tread down the stairway. They could not see an inch before them. Lolita screamed, and Benny, feeling something brush his hand, made a swift attack only to find himself at grips with Frances.

Then the cellar door slammed, and all was still.

"He—he's gone," chattered Frances. "Benny! Lolita!"

Their quavering voices reassured her that they had not been harmed.

"Let's get out of here, *pronto!*" muttered Benny.

They groped their way to the stairway and fled up the steps. Benny grasped the doorknob and turned it.

"Locked!" he exclaimed.

He pounded on the oaken door and twisted the knob frantically. Then recovering his calm, he turned with his back to the panel.

"It's no use—we're locked in all right."

"And not a window in this wretched place," wailed Frances. "We'll die here."

"We'll get out somehow," Benny said staunchly. "Uncle Jim will find us."

"But he and Aunt Frances went to Lormsdale."

"They'll be back."

"But not for hours. Oh, how did we get into such a situation?"

"Juan and Carmen may find us," Lolita said hopefully. "They'll be certain to miss me at meal time. If we hear anyone in the house, we'll shout for help."

"The first thing to do is to see if we can find the flash," Benny advised. "It might be somewhere on the floor if that fellow didn't take it."

"What made you drop it?" demanded Frances, half accusingly. "Of all times—"

"I didn't drop it," the boy denied. "It was torn right out of my hand. Something just whizzed through the air, and presto, the light was gone."

On hands and knees the young people groped about over the floor. Finally Frances found the flashlight lying by the foot of the stairway.

"There's something attached to it," she told her companions. "It feels like a rope."

"Turn on the light if it will work," Benny urged. "Is the lens broken?"

Frances fumbled with the switch, and all drew deep sighs of relief as a circle of light brightened the room. Lolita unlooped a coil of horsehide rope from the flashlight, fingering it curiously.

"A very neat job of lassoing," she remarked dryly.

"So that was how it was done," muttered Benny. "Come to think back, I heard the thing swish through the air. When I held up my arm the light must have made a good target."

"I've seen horsehide ropes like this one before." Lolita ran it slowly through her hands. "Indian sheep herders use them in my country."

"Then you think the man who locked us in this hole was a Mexican?" asked Frances.

"It would seem rather evident. But only a person very skillful in throwing a rope could have lassoed the flashlight without touching Benny's arm. I know of one who could have done it—" Her voice trailed into thoughtful silence.

"Someone from your own town?" Benny prompted.

"Yes," Lolita answered reluctantly, "but the person I had in mind would have no reason for doing such a thing. It is unthinkable."

"I'll bet a dollar it was that same fellow Fran and I met in the woods," said Benny.

"What man?" asked Lolita instantly. "You didn't tell me."

Since there seemed no good reason for keeping the story, Benny and Frances gave a complete report of their adventure which had ended with the recovery of the San Paulo plans.

"What did the man look like?" inquired Lolita.

"We didn't see his face," explained Benny. "I guess

we made a big mistake not telling Uncle Jim about it."

"Whoever the person was that locked us up here, he must have been crouching at the head of the stairs for a long while," declared Frances. "I had an uneasy feeling from the very first."

"This is a nice time to be telling us about it," her brother muttered. He sat down on the bottom step, the flashlight dangling loosely from his hand.

"Can't we ram open the door?" she asked hopefully.

"With what?" Benny's voice was scornful.

"Isn't there an old post or something around?"

"Nothing but that old box. I looked everywhere just a short time ago. Anyway, Donna Paquina built stout doors into this house."

Lolita sat down on the step beside Benny, saying in a listless tone:

"Oh, we're here until someone lets us out. I wonder how long that man had been listening to our conversation?"

"He must have heard everything we said," replied Benny. "Say, what became of that picture brick? Who had it last?"

"I did," replied Lolita weakly. "But I don't have it now. I guess I must have dropped it."

"Let's find it before the flash goes dead," Benny suggested.

They were glad to have an occupation which would take their minds away from their present predicament.

However, as Benny slowly moved the light back and forth across the basement floor, there was no sign of the missing brick.

"We were standing right here by the fruit box," said Lolita in perplexity. "I remember, because when the light went out, someone pushed against me, and I struck my leg against the sharp edge."

"Maybe the brick was jerked out of your hand, Lolita," ventured Frances. "Can't you recall?"

"My mind just went blank for a moment. Everything was so confused."

"That fellow certainly came down here into the cellar," declared Benny. "What could he have been after except the brick?"

They covered every inch of the floor near the place where they had been standing. The picture brick definitely had been taken.

"Anyway, you saw the drawing of the Painted Shield and understand its significance," Frances said to Lolita with forced cheerfulness. "No one can take that knowledge from you."

"Yes, but the person who stole the brick must understand its meaning, too. Right now the fellow may be on his way to Mexico, while we are cooped up here, utterly helpless."

"It's maddening," Frances agreed.

After awhile they went back to the stairway which afforded the only comfortable place to sit. Benny

amused himself by making patterns of light on the walls.

"Oughtn't we to save the battery?" Frances asked presently.

Benny obediently shut off the flashlight, but the darkness was very hard to endure. Several times the boy went to the top of the stairway and with his ear against the door, listened for a sound in the house. All was quiet.

"It seems like Juan, or Carmen, or someone should be looking for us by this time," he muttered.

"Maybe we'll never be found," said Frances gloomily.

"'Course we will," Benny insisted. "Uncle Jim and Aunt Harriet just haven't come back from Lormsdale yet."

To divert their thoughts to more pleasant channels, Lolita told her companions of her own country, describing the mountains, the tropical shores, the free and easy way of life in a land of sunshine.

"I'd like to go there," sighed Frances. "It must be wonderful in the spring when the flowers bloom."

"Mexico has its less attractive aspects," Lolita admitted. "There are vast expanses of dry, arid land, and of course, the oil fields near Tampico. Andres worked there for two years as a driller, and I visited him. It was a depressing place."

The three were silent for awhile, and then Lolita spoke again.

"I've not found a single clue regarding my brother's present whereabouts since I came here. I've been thinking that he may have returned home. Considering this new emergency, it seems to me I should waste no time in getting back to Mexico myself."

"When will you go?" asked Frances in a subdued voice.

"Just as soon as we get out of here. There isn't an hour to be lost, for that fellow who took our brick undoubtedly is making straight for the border."

"We'll hate to see you go, Lolita."

"I'll be sorry to leave, too. It's been fun knowing you both. You must visit me sometime."

"We'll be back in Illinois in another week or so," declared Benny. "At least I *hope* we will."

"But we must see one another again," Lolita insisted earnestly. "Andres and I often have talked of finishing our schooling in this country. Perhaps we can persuade Mother to allow us to come back."

Benny and Frances admired the courageous way their companion looked at the future, refusing to acknowledge that her brother might be dead. They fell into another long silence which was broken when Lolita said:

"I don't see why someone doesn't come. Carmen must have missed us by this time. Let's have some light so that we can see what time it is."

Benny snapped on the flashlight and looked at his watch.

"We've been here two hours. It's getting on toward five o'clock."

Frances sprang up from the steps. "Let's yell for help," she proposed.

"No one will hear us," Benny protested.

"Anyway, it will be better than just sitting here and waiting."

They went to the top of the stairway, and shouted in unison. Soon their voices became husky, and they sat down again, feeling more discouraged than before.

The minutes dragged slowly on. Benny's back began to ache from sitting so long in a cramped position. He arose to give the muscles a rest. At the same moment the three companions heard a sound overhead which they dared to hope was the slamming of a door.

"Yell!" commanded Benny.

He bounded up the stairway and began pounding on the door while Lolita and Frances quickly followed, screaming for help at the top of their voices.

"Listen!" ordered Benny suddenly.

They could hear running footsteps now and felt certain their cries had been heard. But to make sure, Benny kept beating against the door with his fists.

"Frances! Benny!" shouted a familiar voice.

"It's Uncle Jim," cried Frances. "Oh, I knew he would come!"

A minute more and a key turned in the lock. The door swung back and the three prisoners staggered out into the fresh air.

"Oh, you poor dears," murmured Aunt Harriet, a sob in her voice. "How long have you been shut up in that horrible place?"

"Hours! Years!" declared Frances, laughing a trifle hysterically.

"Aren't we sights?" murmured Lolita, glancing at her hands and dress which were streaked with dirt.

"Nothing matters except that you are safe," said Aunt Harriet shakily. "What happened?"

Benny and Frances both began to talk at once. Their story about the picture brick was unintelligible until Lolita gave her version. Mr. Kellog listened grimly, speaking no word, but his wife had a great deal to say.

"We're leaving this place at once," she declared. "Nothing could induce me to remain here even another day."

"Oh, Aunt Harriet," protested Benny. "We're not hurt a bit."

"It's not your fault that you aren't," she replied with asperity. "If we hadn't received that telephone message I shudder to think what might have happened to you all."

"Telephone message?" asked Benny in astonishment. "What message?"

"We were just getting into our car to leave Lormsdale when a man came running out of the grocery store," Mrs. Kellog explained. "He told us we were wanted on the telephone. Naturally we thought some-

thing had gone wrong here, but we weren't prepared for the message we received."

"Who telephoned you?" interposed Frances.

"It was an anonymous call. A man told us to return here at once—that we would find you three children locked in the cellar."

"Only one person could have known that," murmured Benny. "The fellow who made off with the picture brick."

"The man spoke English with difficulty," declared Mrs. Kellog. "In fact, when I first heard his voice, I thought for an instant that it was Juan. It couldn't have been, of course."

"I wonder," said Lolita soberly. "Let's talk with him now."

CHAPTER XV

OVER THE BORDER

SHADES were drawn at the windows of the little cottage, and the battered Calverton car no longer stood near the door. Lolita, who approached the dwelling with Mr. and Mrs. Kellog, Frances, and Benny, immediately commented upon its deserted appearance.

"Yes, it does look as if Juan and Carmen have taken the car and gone away somewhere," observed Frances.

"I did not give them permission to use the automobile," replied Lolita briefly.

She opened the door of the cottage and went directly to the tiny bedroom which had been occupied by Juan and his wife. The room was tidy and in perfect order save that the bed had been stripped bare of linen and blankets.

Lolita jerked open a closet door. All clothing had been removed.

"Juan and Carmen have gone!" she cried. "They've taken the car and deserted me!"

"Say, I saw Carmen loading boxes into the auto early this afternoon," recalled Benny. "But I never guessed they were skipping out."

Lolita sank down on the edge of the bed. She was a picture of dejection.

"I trusted Juan," she said bitterly. "Why, he had served our family faithfully since I was a child."

"Perhaps they only went to Lormsdale," suggested Frances.

Lolita shook her head. "No, their things are gone. They have returned to Mexico, and I am stranded here."

"Say, you don't think Juan was the one who locked us in the cellar?" Benny asked incredulously.

"What else can I think? Juan is very skillful in throwing a rope. The possibility occurred to me at once, but I refused to believe that it could have been he."

"The voice over the telephone certainly resembled his," declared Mrs. Kellog.

"Oh, it must have been Juan," Lolita said miserably. "By this time, he'll probably be over the border."

"And with the picture brick in his possession," added Frances. "He knew its significance, of course?"

"Yes, Juan would understand the meaning of the drawing. He and Carmen have been familiar with Donna Paquina's story, and they knew why Andres came here."

Although the desertion shocked everyone, Benny and Frances were not greatly surprised. In thinking back they recalled that Juan had acted somewhat suspiciously from the day of his arrival at Calverton Place.

They were convinced now that he must have been the cigarette smoker who had loitered in the patio of the octagonal house upon their first visit there with Lolita. He had listened to their conversation, then slipped outdoors before they had descended the stone stairway.

Juan had distrusted their friendship for Lolita; of that they were certain also. When they considered the man who had accosted them in the woods to demand the San Paulo plans, they were puzzled. The voice which had commanded them had not been Juan's voice. And no one could doubt that the servant and his wife had received a severe beating at the hands of unknown assailants.

"Why do you think Juan took the picture brick?" Frances asked after a moment.

"He could have only one reason, it seems to me. The desire for easy riches has overpowered his better instincts. It's hard to believe that Juan would stoop to such treachery."

"What will you do now?" inquired Benny.

"I don't know," Lolita replied unhappily. "I had intended to start for Mexico at once. With no car I can't possibly leave."

"Couldn't you take a train?" suggested Mrs. Kellog.

"I haven't enough money for the fare."

"That is easily remedied," declared M. Kellog without the slightest hesitation. "I'll lend you whatever you need."

"You are very kind," Lolita said gratefully, "but I

could never reach home ahead of Juan. The railway does not pass through our *pueblo.*"

"You could overtake him in a car?"

"I might."

"Then suppose we hire an automobile?" Mr. Kellog proposed.

"Do you think I could get one at Lormsdale?" Lolita questioned eagerly.

"I'm sure of it."

Taking new hope, Lolita sprang up and began packing her suitcase. Frances helped her, yet her heart was heavy as she realized that soon she would part from her friend, perhaps never to see her again.

Suddenly Lolita turned toward her. "I wish you and Benny could come with me."

"I wish we could too, Lolita."

"Well, why not? If I hire a car it will have to be sent back to Lormsdale anyway. Let's ask your aunt and uncle."

Approached upon the subject, Mr. and Mrs. Kellog both said "no," but Benny and Frances began an outrageous campaign of teasing. They explained away all objections to the plan, and little by little convinced their aunt and uncle they could escort Lolita to her home and return safely within a week's time.

"I wouldn't mind seeing Mexico myself," Mr. Kellog said at last. "It would be an educational trip."

"Why don't we all go?" suggested Frances eagerly.

Mr. Kellog shook his head. "I can't leave Lormsdale

for a few days. A friend of Mr. Leigh's, a geologist, is coming here to see me."

At another time Frances would have wondered who the man might be and why he was being sent. Now all her thoughts centered upon one objective—the trip to Mexico.

"Oh, please, Uncle Jim," she pleaded. "If you and Aunt Harriet plan to stay at Lormsdale anyway, it would all work out beautifully. Can't we go?"

"It would make up for missing the Evangeline Country, wouldn't it?" asked Uncle Jim with a twinkle.

In the end he and Mrs. Kellog reluctantly gave their consent, for they realized that if they denied Frances and Benny this opportunity they might never forgive themselves. Taking their cue, the boy and girl chatted gaily about the wonderful educational opportunity which the trip afforded, while their active minds played hide and seek amid ancient pyramids and Aztec temples. They might yet learn the secret of the Painted Shield!

A key was turned in the door of the cottage, and Benny and Frances quickly packed their own bags. The Kellog camping equipment was loaded into the automobile for Aunt Harriet had meant it when she had declared she would not remain at Calverton Place another night. Despite the haste, it was nearly dark by the time the car rolled down the private lane.

Lolita turned to glance back at the octagonal house silhouetted against the leaden sky.

"I hope I'll come back sometime," she said softly. "I don't suppose I ever shall for the place must be sold."

Mr. Kellog turned the car into the main road, waiting while Benny fastened the gate.

"By the way," he said to Lolita. "I sent that wire to your mother."

"I wish you would take the answer when it comes," the girl requested. "If Mother says to sell the property to Mr. Harmond's prospect, would it be too much trouble for you to arrange the sale?"

"Not at all. I'll be glad to do it."

As the car bounced over the rough roads, Mrs. Kellog glanced several times at the sky, remarking that it looked as if a storm might be blowing up.

"It worries me to have you young folks starting out on such a long journey alone," she said anxiously, "especially with bad weather threatening. Might it not be wiser to wait until morning?"

"Juan and Carmen have several hours start on us now," protested Benny. "It won't do Lolita a bit of good unless she gets home ahead of them."

A brisk wind was blowing by the time the car reached Lormsdale, and one could almost feel rain in the air. While Mrs. Kellog and the young people ate a hasty supper at a restaurant, Mr. Kellog made the rounds trying to hire a good car and a trustworthy

driver. He returned to announce that all arrangements had been made.

"Everyone tells me this man, Fred Karns, is the best driver in Lormsdale, so I believe you'll be in safe hands," he declared. "You may run into rain, but it shouldn't last long."

Lolita bade Mr. and Mrs. Kellog goodbye, and with tears in her eyes, thanked them for their help.

"We're glad to do anything we can," returned Mr. Kellog. "With good luck you should overtake Juan somewhere on the road."

The car which came for the young people was a late model, built for speed as well as comfort. Fred Karns, the driver, had a dependable look and Mrs. Kellog was relieved to see that he was well past middle age.

"Remember, we are trusting the young people to your care," she said to him. "So do drive carefully."

As the car pulled away, Benny shouted back that he would mail a postcard as soon as they arrived at Lolita's home. Frances craned her neck until she could see her aunt and uncle no longer, and then settled back in the seat.

"Aren't they good sports?" she murmured.

"The most wonderful persons I've ever met," answered Lolita warmly.

The car turned a corner and rolled into a filling station.

"Stopping already?" Benny called to the driver. "We want to make fast time."

"We will," replied Fred Karns, amiably, "but not without gas."

The filling station was the same one at which the Kellogs had stopped upon their first visit to Lormsdale. As the attendant ran gasoline into the tank, Frances turned to Lolita and said:

"Remember, this was where we first met."

"I was very rude when you offered to help me," apologized Lolita. "I didn't know you then, and I was frightened."

"Why were you crying, 'Lita?" questioned Benny. "Was it on account of something Sidney Harmond had done?"

"No, I was worried about Andres."

Mention of her missing brother brought grave lines to Lolita's face again. As if trying to reassure herself, she said aloud:

"Andres never was a person to write letters. I keep hoping he has returned home during my absence."

Benny and Frances wisely said nothing, although it struck them that if Lolita's brother had arrived safely in Mexico, Donna Raquel surely would have sent word to her daughter.

Frances reflected that nothing had turned out exactly as she had expected. She had felt so confident that Sidney Harmond was an outright scoundrel bent upon cheating Lolita. The day's developments tended to show that he had been misjudged.

"Yet his actions were peculiar to say the least," she

told herself. "He went skulking about Calverton Place, and Juan claimed to have seen him with the man who attacked him. Of course, Juan may have lied—"

"A penny for your thoughts, Fran," broke in Benny. "You look as fierce as a tiger."

"Do I?" Her face instantly relaxed and she laughed. "I was just thinking about our friend, Sidney Harmond. We'll have to apologize to him when we get back here again."

Benny did not answer, for the filling station attendant had stepped to the side of the car to collect his pay from Fred Karns.

"Looks like a bad storm rollin' up, sir," he said genially. "Which way you traveling?"

"Across the border."

"Another car filled up here a little while ago, heading for Mexico, too. Afraid you're running straight into the storm."

Lolita leaned forward in the seat.

"How long ago did that other car leave?" she inquired.

The filling station attendant glanced squarely at her for the first time, and politely doffed his cap.

"Good evening, Miss. I didn't recognize you for a minute. Why, your friends went through about two hours ago."

"I was just wondering if they really were my friends," said Lolita.

"They were in an old car," the man told her.

"A man and a woman—Latin Americans?"

"That's right, they had a monkey with them."

"Then it must have been Juan and Carmen," Lolita murmured. Aloud she asked: "Did they mention which road they were taking?"

"No, the young fellow with them was in such a hurry he didn't even stop for his change."

"There was a third member in the party?" Lolita inquired in a low voice.

"That's right, Miss. Well, good luck, folks. I hope you have a nice trip."

With a friendly salute, the man stepped back out of the way. Before Lolita could ask another question, the car rolled down the curving drive, and the race to Mexico had begun.

CHAPTER XVI

WASH-OUT

LOLITA considered requesting the driver to turn back, and then decided against it. Already hours had been lost, and it was doubtful it the filling station man could provide additional information about the third passenger in Juan's party.

Frances and Benny were of the opinion that the man might be the same one they had encountered in the woods. They expressed a belief that Juan had been in contact with him since the day of his arrival at Calverton Place.

"I saw Juan going into the woods early this afternoon," Benny disclosed. "He acted then as if he might be intending to meet someone."

"Oh, I've been betrayed," said Lolita bitterly. "I trusted Juan and Carmen, confided in them, and this is the way I am repaid."

"We'll beat them to Mexico yet!" announced Benny.

"They only have about two hours start," added Frances. "This car travels faster than yours, doesn't it, Lolita?"

"Oh, yes. Our auto was an old wreck—nearly seven years old."

"Then we have a good chance to overtake them," Benny declared cheerfully.

"Unless we're held up by the storm," amended his sister.

She rolled down the car window to gaze up at the sky. There were no stars, and while she actually could not see the clouds she knew they were dropping lower, settling over the countryside like a dark, heavy blanket.

Lormsdale had been left far behind, and with no lighted habitations to mark the way, the road ahead stretched on, deserted and gloomy. Over hills and into valleys they sped, the brilliant headlights cutting a narrow swath through the inky blackness of the night.

At first the young people chatted excitedly, but as the hours wore on, they fell silent. Frances dropped off to sleep on Benny's shoulder and did not awaken until he gave her a pinch.

"Wake up, Fran. We're at the border."

There was a tedious delay while officials examined Lolita's papers and asked many questions. Benny and Frances presented the tourist cards obtained for them by their uncle. Finally, seals were attached to their luggage, and the car was permitted to drive on.

They had been told that they would be stopped again farther up the road for a second inspection, but mile after mile fell behind them, and they were not detained again. The pavement was smooth and wide. They met no cars, nor did they overtake any.

The quiet hum of the motor lulled Frances to sleep

once more. However, it seemed to her that she scarcely had closed her eyes, when Benny gave her a rude shove.

"Say, try sleeping on your own arm for awhile," he muttered. "Mine is paralyzed."

Frances straightened up and saw with astonishment that rain was falling in torrents. Huge drops pounded against the windshield, while Fred Karns leaned forward over the wheel, straining to see the road. The automobile's speed had been reduced to thirty miles an hour.

"How long has it been raining?" she asked, covering a yawn.

"A couple of hours," answered Benny. "We're not making good time."

"At least we have paved roads."

"We'll not be traveling on them all the way," said Lolita anxiously. "Soon we must leave the main highway, and then our troubles will begin. I only hope this storm hasn't extended very far south."

As the night wore on the rain slackened to a steady drizzle and finally ceased. Stopping briefly at a filling station for gasoline and hot coffee, the young people were discouraged to learn that the storm had been very widespread. According to report, bridges were washed out ahead of them.

"Maybe the rumor isn't true," Lolita said hopefully, as they started on once more. "We'll keep going as far as we can, at least."

Dawn found the party nearing the end of the pavement. Suddenly out of the darkness ahead loomed a burro laden with huge clay pots which were being carried to market. Fred Karns swerved the car sharply to avoid striking the animal.

A little farther on they passed a group of peons, and a long caravan of burros, each animal so heavily burdened with wood that only his four short feet were visible beneath the moving load.

Despite their weariness, Frances and Benny found the sights of the road intriguing. Yet when Fred Karns drew up at a tourist hotel in one of the Indian villages, they welcomed a respite from riding. There they breakfasted on hot chocolate and rolls and from the proprietor inquired about the roads ahead.

The man could offer them no definite information. He had not heard that a bridge had been washed out, although the storm had been a severe one. No car had come through from the north that morning. He would be very happy to have the party remain at his hotel until word was brought.

"Thank you, but we can't delay," Lolita told him in Spanish. "We must push on."

"Isn't there an alternative road?" inquired Benny.

Lolita shook her head. "This is the only highway to Xochimecijo."

They finished breakfast and arose to leave. As Lolita handed the proprietor a bill to pay for the meal, she

noticed a small gold pen lying on the counter by the cash register. She picked it up, turning it slowly over in her hand.

"This pen—" she said in a strangely agitated voice. "Where did you get it, Senor? It is not yours?"

"No, Senorita, it was left here earlier this morning."

Frances and Benny moved nearer the counter, aware from the tone of Lolita's voice that the pen had a particular significance to her.

"Not by a young man, Senor?" she inquired.

"Si," the proprietor replied, "he signed a traveler's check and then went away without picking up the gold pen."

"What name did the young man sign?" demanded Lolita. "It wasn't Andres Calverton?"

The proprietor regarded her with surprise. "Si, Senorita, you know him?"

"He is my brother!"

Turning around, Lolita faced Benny and Frances with quiet jubilance. "It is as I hoped! Andres passed through here on his way home! Oh, I am so happy, so relieved!"

"Finding your brother makes up for all the other hard luck," declared Frances warmly.

"I don't care about anything now," laughed Lolita. She faced the proprietor again. "What time did my brother pass through here?"

"During the early hours of the morning, Senorita. Before the storm."

"Alone, of course."

"No, Senorita, with two companions."

"Two?" repeated Lolita, her gaze roving swiftly to Frances and Benny.

"A man and a woman."

"Could it have been Juan and Carmen?" asked Frances in a low tone. "It scarcely seems possible."

"I—I don't know what to think now," murmured Lolita.

She asked the proprietor several questions and from his description became convinced that Andres' companions had been none other than her own servants. This confirmed the Lormsdale filling station man's report that a stranger had been traveling with Juan and Carmen. Yet Lolita was bewildered by her findings and for the moment could offer no interpretation.

"As the young man is your brother, will you do me the favor to take the pen to him?" the hotel keeper requested.

"Yes, I will be glad to do it," Lolita answered absently. "Thank you."

She pocketed the pen, and as one in a trance walked to the waiting car.

"I can't understand it at all," she murmured as Fred Karns started the motor. "If Juan and Carmen were in communication with Andres why didn't they tell me?"

"It seems very strange," agreed Frances. "You're certain the pen belonged to your brother?"

"Oh, yes, it was made especially for Andres by a skilled native workman. "See—it bears his initials." She offered the pen for inspection.

"But why would your brother be traveling home with Juan and Carmen?" asked Frances, her gaze upon a group of ragged children who stared at the slowly moving car. "Have they known all the time where he was?"

"If they kept such information from me it was very cruel of them. I can't believe they would do such a thing, or for that matter, that Andres would have any part in deceiving me."

"Juan and Carmen haven't proven themselves trustworthy," Frances reminded her. "We know that they ran away with the picture brick."

"Oh, I'm not sure of anything now. This latest discovery throws everything into a different light."

"Juan and Carmen deserted you without an explanation."

"Yes," agreed Lolita unwillingly, "I can't forgive that."

She stared straight before her as the car rattled over the cobble-stones. At the extreme edge of the village clustered a group of grass-thatched huts, and beyond, open country rose in easy stages to the mountains. The road was little more than a double cow path, gutted by the rains, cluttered with rocks and stones.

"Why, it isn't so muddy," Frances observed as the car bounced along.

"The soil is porous," explained Lolita. "Rain runs off quickly. We'll make it all right if the bridge didn't go out."

"Does that happen often?" asked Benny curiously.

"Nearly every time we have an especially heavy rain."

"I should think they'd build better bridges."

"So should I," said Lolita with a smile, "but they don't. In Mexico everyone has plenty of time. What does it matter, a day or two of waiting for the water to go down?"

The car bounced on over the rocky road. Occasionally, they came to muddy hollows, and once when the rear wheels bogged down up to the hubs, everyone had to get out and push. As the sun climbed higher in the sky, it became hot and oppressive. Steam drifted up from the moist earth, adding to the discomfort of the weary travelers.

"It doesn't look as if we'll overtake Juan's party," Frances remarked presently.

Lolita shook her head. "They made much better time than I thought possible."

"How much farther do we have to go?" asked Benny, shifting to a more comfortable position.

"Only ten miles after we cross the river—if we cross it."

Fred Karns was in need of sleep, and Benny offered to relieve him at the wheel. He had not been driving a half hour when the car swung around from behind a giant cluster of cacti and came within view of the

river. The road came to an end abruptly at its banks.

"Where's the bridge?" Benny demanded, putting on the foot brake.

"Gone!" exclaimed Lolita. "I was afraid of it."

"Now what are we supposed to do?" Frances opened the door on her side and stepped down from the car. "Wait here until they build another bridge?"

"When the water goes down we'll be able to drive across. The stream bed is firm."

"How long will that be?" inquired Benny.

"Perhaps an hour. Perhaps two days."

They all went down to look at the turbulent, rushing water. There was no mark to show that the flood was receding. After one glance, Fred Karns shrugged his bent shoulders and went back to the car to finish his nap.

Across the swollen stream, within hailing distance, were three peons who had been caught by the flood. They accepted the delay philosophically, having stretched themselves out in the warm sun. Soon others came. Lunches were spread on the grass, and a festive atmosphere prevailed.

Benny and the girls waited with less patience. The situation seemed even more unbearable when Lolita pointed out a large hill which could be seen against the blue sky many miles away.

"It is the pyramid of Cochicean," she said. "Had it not been for this wash-out we would have been there in less than an hour."

Benny sat for a time by the stream bank, tossing rocks into the boiling water. From the stolid way the Indians watched him he suspected they were amused by his lack of patience. At length, losing all interest in the flood, he arose and went to explore a nearby ravine.

The boy had not been gone many minutes when Frances and Lolita saw him running back toward the river. He paused and motioned to them.

"Come here!" he called in an excited voice. "I've found—"

The wind carried away his final words. Without repeating, Benny turned and darted into the ravine again.

CHAPTER XVII

IN THE RAVINE

WONDERING what Benny could have discovered, Lolita and Frances hastened to join him. Reaching the edge of the rain-washed ravine, they stopped short, horrified by the sight which met their gaze.

Far down the declivity, lying on its side, was a derelict automobile. Benny had descended to it and was trying to pull open one of the bent doors.

"Why, it looks like my old car!" gasped Lolita. "What has happened to Andres and Juan?"

Thoroughly frightened the girls began the treacherous descent, stumbling and slipping down the steep, rocky bank.

"Oh, Benny," cried Lolita breathlessly, "is anyone—?"

"Just an empty car," he finished, "but it's yours, 'Lita. See, the plates are the same."

"The car must have gone over the bank last night!" she exclaimed. "Juan and Andres are both such reckless drivers. They've been injured—perhaps killed!"

As the full significance of the accident came slowly to her, Lolita's strength deserted her. She sat down on a large, flat rock, staring almost stupidly at the twisted wreckage. Frances went to her and slipped an arm comfortingly about her thin shoulders.

"The car went over the bank right enough," muttered Benny, "but I'm wondering if it was an accident?"

"Not an accident?" demanded his sister.

"Just take a look at the windshield."

"It's shattered."

"By a bullet," said Benny quietly. "You can see where it went through, just above the driver's seat."

His words brought Lolita to her feet. She and Frances both went over to help the boy force open the jammed car door.

Lying on the front seat behind the steering wheel was a felt sombrero. Lolita snatched it up.

"Juan's hat!" she cried.

Turning it slowly in her hands she noticed a small, neatly cut hole in the peak.

"This was made from a bullet," she acknowledged. "There has been a gun battle."

Benny had noted an even more alarming fact. A few drops of blood were splattered over the car floor. He did not communicate his discovery to Lolita, and in her excitement, she failed to make the observation for herself.

"What do you think could have happened?" asked Frances after a moment.

"Juan and Carmen—and probably Andres, were followed and attacked!" cried Lolita. "They must have lost control of the car and went over the bank."

"Or the automobile could have been pushed over after the shooting," supplied Benny. "The attackers

may have done it so the car wouldn't be found right away."

The young people scarcely dared speculate upon what had become of the unfortunate occupants of the mutilated vehicle. If the three had been riding in it at the time of the crash there could be little hope that all had escaped injury.

"Perhaps, Juan, Carmen and your brother went on to the next town," suggested Frances. "They may not have been very much hurt."

"In that case, if they escaped their attackers, they surely would try to reach Xochimecijo," declared Lolita. "We are not many miles from there now."

The absence of luggage in the car tended to support her hope that the party had proceeded to the Calverton *hacienda.* Yet it was impossible to tell if anyone save themselves had entered or left the ravine, for the night rain had washed away all footprints.

Satisfied they could learn no more, Benny and the girls climbed from the gully to make a careful inspection of the surrounding territory. They found no evidence which contributed to the mystery, no clue pointing to the identity of the attackers.

Presently, returning to the hired automobile, Lolita sat for a long while staring at the distant pyramid.

"If only we were across the river!" she murmured. "It is so hard to wait."

While the young people had been engaged in the ravine, the flood had reached its crest, and now the

waters were rapidly receding. Benny kept close watch of the various levels, coming now and then to report to Lolita and his sister.

Another hour elapsed. One by one the natives ventured into the stream, either afoot or straddling their burros.

"Don't you think we can make it now?" Benny eagerly inquired of Fred Karns.

"Looks too deep to me."

"Let's try," urged Lolita. "If we stall the peons will help push."

The car careened down into the stream, water sloshing up to the running board. Halfway across, the engine began to splutter.

"There she goes," groaned Benny.

However, the water came no higher, and the opposite shore was reached without the motor getting wet.

"Thank goodness," sighed Lolita, "now it shouldn't take us long to reach home."

At the next *pueblo* a brief stop was made to inquire if news had been brought there regarding the accident in the ravine. Lolita was troubled to learn that Juan, Carmen and her brother had not passed through the village nor had any report been made.

During the remainder of the journey she had little to say. Only when they came within view of the red rooftops of Xochimecijo did she arouse from the lethargy into which she had fallen.

Children, dogs and pigs scattered to safety as the car

swung slowly down a narrow cobble-stone street. Women who were carrying filled water jars from the public fountains turned to stare, and Frances thought their glances none too friendly.

She became even more aware of a hostile atmosphere as they passed the open air market where many natives were selling their wares. A peon deliberately blocked the way, forcing Fred Karns to stop the car for a moment. Again, when he tooted the horn, a man called out something in a surly tone.

"What did he say?" asked Benny curiously.

"I didn't hear," answered Lolita. "Nothing complimentary I should judge."

Once through the *pueblo,* the mountains stretched ahead, blue and gold in the sunlight. On either side of the road were fertile fields.

"All this is Calverton land," said Lolita, waving her hand vaguely.

They overtook a two-wheeled cart drawn by oxen, and came at last to a great *hacienda* of pale pink adobe. The gate stood open, and Lolita instructed Fred Karns to drive into the courtyard.

Before anyone could alight from the car, the door of the *hacienda* opened, and a middle-aged, dark haired woman, ran out to meet them. Even before Lolita cried "Mother!" Frances and Benny knew that she could be none other than Donna Raquel.

They embraced, and then Lolita introduced Benny and Frances who were given a welcome only slightly

less warm. Before anyone could inquire about Andres, Donna Raquel had many questions of her own to ask. What had become of the old car? And where were Juan and Carmen?

"They're not here?" Lolita asked dully. "Nor Andres?"

Donna Raquel's face lost its smile. "I have received no word from your brother since he left here many weeks ago. You were unable to find a trace of him?"

"We followed Andres into Mexico only to lose him," Lolita said. "Now I do not know if he is alive, dead or in the hands of an enemy."

Rapidly, she recounted the events which had followed since Juan and Carmen had deserted her at Calverton Place, ending with the discovery of the car in the ravine.

"How Juan and Carmen joined forces with Andres is beyond my knowledge," the girl added. "I hoped they had all come here, but since they did not, I wonder if Andres were not betrayed."

"By Juan and Carmen?" Donna Raquel questioned incredulously. "They love Andres as their own son."

"We have been too trusting, Mother," Lolita replied. "The fact is that Juan and his wife deserted me without a word of explanation. Why should we believe they would treat Andres with more consideration?"

"But they would have no reason for mistreating your brother."

"They may have believed that he was keeping certain

vital information away from them which they desired."

"But Juan already had the picture brick in his possession," interposed Frances who could not agree with Lolita's latest theory.

"We can't be certain he took it, although the evidence does point to such a conclusion."

"Even so, what could Juan hope to gain by attacking your brother? Isn't it reasonable that the three of them were set upon by a common enemy?"

"You are likely right," agreed Lolita, "only what became of Andres after the car went into the ravine? I can't think anything through. My head whirls."

"You are worn and weary from your journey," said her mother gently. "Come into the *hacienda,* all of you. We will talk later of what must be done."

Donna Raquel urged Fred Karns to accompany the others, but he declined, offering as his excuse that he wished to return to the *pueblo* for a little sight-seeing. He carried the luggage to the house, and then, promising to return the following afternoon, drove away in the car.

Donna Raquel closed the heavy door behind the young people, slipping a bolt into place.

"Why did you do that, Mother?" Lolita asked, startled by the action. "Where are the servants?"

"Nearly all of them have left me."

"Deserted?"

"Yes, someone in the *pueblo* has stirred up trouble. Outrageous stories have been told about you and

Andres. It is believed that you both went to the United States for the same purpose, to bring home stolen riches."

"How fantastic!"

"We have always been regarded as outsiders here, and now it is worse than before," went on Donna Raquel. "No one will work at the *hacienda.* Even the laborers who till the fields have gone. I dare not visit the *pueblo* lest I be openly hissed."

"This is more serious than I thought, Mother. Something must be done—and quickly."

"Only one thing will satisfy the peons," Donna Raquel returned bitterly. "The lost gold and silver must be handed over to them, but one cannot recover what does not exist."

"Mother, I've learned enough to feel certain the cache is very real!" cried Lolita. "The Aztec gold entrusted to General Calverton lies hidden somewhere in the pyramid! I will tell you all about it when we have made our guests comfortable."

"Indeed we are rude to speak of our troubles," murmured Donna Raquel.

In the absence of a servant, she escorted Frances and Benny to their rooms, great barren chambers with barred windows which overlooked the courtyard. After Donna Raquel had gone, Benny tapped on his sister's door and entered.

"This place looks like a jail to me," he whispered.

"I like it," said Frances, moving to the window.

"I'd like nothing better than to steep my bones in Old World atmosphere for a month."

"We're here at an awkward time, Fran."

"Yes, we are. Lolita is worried about her brother, not to mention all this trouble with the villagers."

"Wonder what she means to do about the Painted Shield? If I were in her shoes I wouldn't let any grass grow under me. I'd get that gold before someone else hauls it away!"

Frances smiled at her brother's remark and turned to gaze toward the great pyramid which could be seen from the window. From this distance it looked like a great, mis-shapen hill. The top was flat and a few scraggly, stunted trees were growing along the sides.

"A pyramid is a rather large burial ground," she remarked dryly. "I doubt that Lolita or any other person will have an easy time locating the gold, even with a definite clue."

Frances left the window. She washed her face, straightened her hair, and then with Benny, stepped out into the *patio*. Lolita and her mother were nowhere about, but presently they came from a nearby room where they evidently had been having a quiet talk.

"I have decided what I must do—" Lolita began as she saw the boy and girl.

She broke off, for hoofbeats could be plainly heard in the courtyard. Running to a window, the girl peered out. Six Mexican horsemen had ridden into the en-

closure. Donna Raquel joined her daughter at the window.

"Those men have been here before!" she cried fearfully. "They come now for no good purpose. Bar all the windows!"

Scarcely had the bolts slid into place, when one of the horsemen alighted. He pounded on the door of the *hacienda,* commanding that it be opened.

"Why do you come?" demanded Donna Raquel, speaking through a tiny panel high on the door.

"We are here for the gold and silver which your daughter brought from Lormsdale," was the curt response. "We will not leave until you give it up."

CHAPTER XVIII

PYRAMID BY MOONLIGHT

THE conversation went on in Spanish, with Donna Raquel protesting that Lolita had brought no gold or silver from Lormsdale. Her voice, polite at first, rose higher and higher as the men refused to go away.

"Then stay if you will!" she cried defiantly, and slammed shut the panel.

The men tied their horses to a tree, and threw themselves comfortably on the ground. There they remained, save for brief foraging trips to the garden and the storehouse. They fed their horses with Donna Raquel's grain, they trampled her flower beds, they tossed dirt into the well, they shook all the fruit from the imported peach tree.

"I cannot bear it any longer," wailed Lolita's mother, as she watched through the barred window. "I will offer them money to go away."

"It would do no good," said Lolita quickly. "They would only take the money and remain."

"But we must do something," murmured Donna Raquel. "I fear that unless we find the Aztec gold and turn it over to the authorities we may never hear from Andres again."

"Something will be done," returned Lolita quietly.

"With the people against us, the authorities will not offer aid even if we could reach them."

"I realize that full well, Mother," said Lolita. "I have another plan, but I cannot carry it through alone. If only one of the servants were here to help me!"

"How about us?" demanded Benny instantly. "Is it anything we can do?"

"We'll be only too glad to help," added Frances.

"I could use you, but the plan has an element of danger," replied Lolita. "Tonight after it is dark, I shall slip out of the house, go to the pyramid and try to locate the gold. Once it is in our possession, the peons can be controlled."

"We'll be right there with you, 'Lita," Benny declared enthusiastically. "Only how will we get out of here without being seen?"

"I'll find a way when the time comes. But I warn you it will be a night of hard toil."

Donna Raquel protested that the plan was too dangerous. But as the afternoon wore on and the men did not leave the courtyard, she gradually became persuaded that drastic action must be taken.

An early supper was eaten, and then the young people waited impatiently for nightfall. Lolita gathered together a pick ax, a shovel and a few additional tools which would be needed at the pyramid.

"How about a lantern?" asked Benny.

"Later on there will be a moon," Lolita said. "It will provide all the light we'll require."

Shadows lengthened in the courtyard and at last darkness settled over the *hacienda.* No lamps were lighted. Glancing out the window at intervals, Lolita saw that the men had built a campfire and were roasting a chicken over the glowing coals.

"Now is our chance," she said. "Mother will help us."

While Donna Raquel made a noise at the front door to attract attention, Lolita and her friends slipped out the back way. They stole through the empty cook house, the leather shop, and then kept close to the *hacienda* wall until they came to a tiny door which Lolita unlocked with a huge key.

"We've outwitted them for the time being at least," she sighed in relief. "Now for the pyramid!"

"How far is it from here?" whispered Frances, afraid to speak aloud lest her voice carry to those inside the walls.

"About three quarters of a mile. We'll have a hard night before we are finished, and perhaps an unsuccessful one."

Lolita led the way across the fields, taking care to move noiselessly until they were a long distance from the *hacienda.* Before they reached the pyramid the moon rose, shedding a soft white light over the countryside. Frances halted, gazing in awe at the solid mass of earth and stone which towered above them.

"It's so beautiful it almost terrifies one," she murmured.

"Oh, the pyramid is just a ruin now," Lolita said carelessly. "Ages ago it must have been spectacular. Fires burned on the terraces and could be seen for miles. During the ceremonies, priests would lead long processions up the steps, each person carrying a lighted torch."

They reached the base of the pyramid and Lolita indicated a series of stone steps leading upward.

"Here is where we start."

"No elevator?" asked Benny.

"Before we get very far you'll be glad we're only climbing as far as the third terrace," laughed Lolita.

They mounted steadily, wasting no breath in conversation. Benny and Frances were chagrined to note that Lolita deliberately slowed her pace so they would not be overtaxed. Their hearts were pounding by the time they reached the first gallery, and they were glad to rest for a moment.

"We walk around the pyramid on this terrace, and then continue the climb from the other side," Lolita explained. "At each elevation we circle the temple."

"What was the idea of building it that way?" inquired Benny as they walked on again.

"I'm not sure, but it made the torch light ceremonials very beautiful."

A little farther on, Lolita suddenly paused and asked Benny for his flashlight. She moved it along the wall until it centered upon a painted figure as large as a human head.

"The Painted Shield!" exclaimed Frances.

"There is a similar figure on each terrace, restored, of course. According to our clue, we should find the hiding place on the third gallery."

"But if the paintings have been restored, how can we be sure they're still in the original locations?" asked Benny in a worried tone. "Any little mistake would throw off all our calculations."

"I've thought about that," admitted Lolita. "I know the restorations were made with the greatest of care."

"Maybe the gold has been hauled away," Benny went on. "It would be just our luck."

"The gold has never been found," declared Lolita confidently. "I am sure of that."

"Don't start complaining about luck before we've even started to dig," Frances chided her brother.

Circling the pyramid, they climbed to the second gallery, paused briefly to catch their breath, and then went on to the third terrace. With the aid of Benny's flashlight again, Lolita soon located the duplication of the Painted Shield.

"Fierce looking old warrior, isn't he?" the boy observed, peering at the representation on the wall. "I hope he doesn't throw a curse on us."

"We're not breaking into King Tut's tomb," laughed Lolita. She was in high spirits now, thrilled by their adventure.

"Where do I start hacking?" Benny asked, swinging his pick experimentally.

"I don't know any more about it than you," admitted

Lolita as she studied the pyramid wall. "I'd guess it might be wise to start working at the base of the figure."

"Then our first job will be to move all the stones that have tumbled down," Benny said, dropping the pick.

They fell to work with Lolita and Frances doing their share of the lifting. It was back-breaking toil, for many of the stones were heavy. At intervals, Benny would flash his light over the pyramid wall, and finally Lolita warned him that he was acting unwisely.

"From this height a beam can be seen for a long distance," she explained. "It might bring our enemies here."

"I didn't stop to think," Benny answered, and thrust the flashlight into his pocket.

The moon rose higher, providing sufficient illumination for the work. Frances lifted stones until her arms trembled from strain. She stopped to rest for a moment, and noticed a little terra cotta figure lying at her feet. With a cry of delight she picked it up.

"See what I've found!"

Lolita came quickly to her side. "It's only an ornament from an old dish," she said. "You'll find hundreds of them on the pyramid."

"Oh," murmured Frances in disappointment, but she dropped the broken figure into her pocket.

Presently, when the great pile of stones had been moved, Benny took his pick and dug it into the wall.

"How far in would you guess the cache might be?" he asked Lolita.

"Not many feet if it's here at all. I know the things were buried hastily, and General Calverton planned to recover them immediately after the battle."

Benny hacked at the wall, slowly opening up a jagged hole beneath the figure of the Painted Shield. His hands were blistered and he was so tired it was all he could do to swing the pick.

"Looks like we should be coming to something if we're ever going to find it," he observed, resting a moment. "We may not be digging in the right place."

"After all this work, if we don't find it, I'll feel like jumping off the pyramid!" Frances announced.

Lolita replied quietly: "I knew when we came here that the chances were against us, but it seemed worth the effort."

"Oh, it is!" cried Frances instantly. "I wasn't complaining. At least, I didn't mean it to sound that way."

"If we don't find the place tonight I must seek the help of an archaeologist," Lolita went on. "The matter will then be taken from my hands."

"That sounds like a good idea to me," nodded Frances. "You intend to turn your findings over to the government anyway."

"My only fear is that some other person will make the discovery before government men can be brought here. Our work tonight cannot be covered up, and besides, the picture brick will almost certainly bring someone to this pyramid."

"Juan?"

Lolita made no response to Frances' question, for just then Benny's pick struck a hard object, and his yell of triumph brought both girls to their feet.

"I've hit something!"

"Another rock probably," Frances commented, fearing to hope.

"It's no rock."

Benny dug away more earth and lifted out a large sheet of corroded, half-disintegrated metal.

"It looks to me like the side of an old chest!" cried Lolita after she had examined it. "Dig on, Benny!"

Thrilled by the discovery, the two girls fell on their knees before the wall, ready to seize upon any treasure which the boy's pick might uncover.

"Be very careful," Lolita warned as Benny swung vigorously. "The Aztec pieces are apt to be fragile and easily damaged."

"Here's something!" shouted Benny. He dropped the pick and pulled a disc-like object from the earth. "Oh, just an old corroded wheel!"

Lolita took it from his hand, brushing away the dirt.

"It's either silver or gold," she said in awe. "See, it has been wrought into a delicate design. When it is properly cleaned—"

"Here's a chain!" broke in Benny. "And all sorts of booty!"

"The chain would be solid gold," declared Lolita

gaily. "When the Spaniards first invaded Mexico, Cortez and his men were presented with them as gifts from the ruler."

"Move over, Benny Wayne, and let someone else have a chance at that hole!" exclaimed Frances, seizing him by the coat collar and trying to pull him away. "Remember, Lolita and I moved half of the stones."

Benny now held a curiously shaped mug in his hand and was content to examine it, allowing the two girls to see what they could find.

"It's just like a grab-bag," chuckled Frances, gleefully bringing to light an odd ornament which had been wrought to resemble a bird.

"Everything is here, just as I hoped," declared Lolita as she fingered a pearl-studded disc. "I'll turn it all over to the government. The true story will come out, and I hope the Calverton name will be cleared of dishonor."

"Say, how will we get this stuff down from the pyramid?" Benny asked in sudden alarm. "These gold bars are heavy as lead."

"If necessary I'll bring a burro," said Lolita, undisturbed. "But we must get everything out tonight, for if any of these things should fall into the hands of the peons they might never reach government officials. It is my hope that eventually a museum can be established near this pyramid which will bring tourists to our *pueblo.*"

"The first thing is to get the stuff out of here," said Benny, carefully laying aside the mug. "It's after three o'clock now."

"So late?" Lolita glanced up at the sky. "Then we must hurry or dawn will be upon us."

They took turns removing objects from the cavity, becoming deeply engrossed in the work. Weariness was forgotten. They were deaf to all sound, intent only upon their absorbing quest.

And then, with no warning, a voice spoke in the darkness behind them. Benny and the girls whirled around to face three Mexicans who blocked the stone stairway.

CHAPTER XIX

A SHIELD OF HONOR

ONE of the men, whose mouth was grotesquely twisted, gave a sharp command in Spanish. Frances and Benny did not understand his words, but the gleaming pistol in his fist conveyed a message of its own.

"Resistance is useless," Lolita warned her friends in a low voice. "These men do not come from the *pueblo*. They are desperadoes."

The Mexican motioned for the young people to move away from the yawning hole. He made them stand farther down the terrace with their faces to the wall. While his two companions gathered up the rich Aztec relics, he remained on guard.

"So obliging of you, Senorita, to save us much labor," he said to Lolita with a smirk.

"I know you, Senor Gonzelez!" she retorted angrily. "The *Rurales* long have been after you for robbing the Moreno *hacienda!*"

"Si, there is a price upon my head," laughed the man.

"And it was you who followed my party to Lormsdale, cruelly beating my servants, Carmen and Juan," Lolita accused.

"And it is I, Carlos Gonzelez, who will have the gold," boasted the outlaw. "By dawn we will be far away in the hills, leaving no trail behind."

Turning toward his companions, he curtly ordered them to hasten their work. Benny and the girls were sick at heart with the realization that they could do nothing. They were unarmed, the stairway leading down from the pyramid was blocked, and even if they could gain it, they could not hope to reach the base in safety.

"What brought you here, Senor Gonzelez?" Lolita asked presently. "You saw our light?"

"Si, Senorita, but we were even then riding toward the pyramid."

"So you knew that the gold was hidden here? How did you learn?"

"The senorita would like to know? I will show you!"

With an arrogant, self-satisfied air, the outlaw drew the painted brick from a pocket of his leather jacket and tossed it at Lolita's feet.

"I have no use for it now," he laughed. "You may have it."

"The Senor is very kind," Lolita retorted ironically. "So it was you who threw the lasso?"

Turning her head, she observed that her question had startled the man.

"Your eyes to the wall, Senorita!" he ordered sharply. And then in an amiable, silken voice: "Rope throwing

is not one of my accomplishments, Senorita. My skill lies with the dagger."

To prove his words, he jerked a knife from his belt and with a deft movement of the wrist, pinned it to the earthen wall just above the rocky ledge which bore the Painted Shield.

Lolita ventured no further questions, but she was shaken with fear. If Senor Gonzelez had not obtained the picture brick at Lormsdale, then it could have fallen into his hands only in one way. He and his men had followed Juan and Andres, and had attacked them in the ravine.

"What did he say about the brick?" Frances asked in a low tone, for the conversation had been carried on in Spanish.

Lolita started to translate, but her words were cut short by Senor Gonzelez who could not understand English.

"The senorita will confine her conversation to me," he ordered curtly, retrieving the dagger.

"Thank you, I haven't any more to say," Lolita retorted.

Her silence proved equally irritating to the man, for after a moment he remarked leadingly: "The senorita is worried about her brother, perhaps?"

Lolita's fingernails bit deeply into the palms of her hands. She did not speak.

Senor Gonzelez was enjoying his cat and mouse game. "You will not see him again, Senorita."

"What have you done to Andres?" Lolita demanded, goaded beyond endurance.

"Your brother is such a reckless driver—and a very poor shot."

"You are a fiend!"

Senor Gonzelez roared with laughter and carelessly allowed the revolver to dangle loosely in his hand. Benny had been watching for just such a chance. Whirling toward the man, he sought to grasp the weapon.

Senor Gonzelez neatly side-stepped and brought the butt of the weapon down on the boy's wrist with a hard blow. He shoved him back against the wall, saying something which Benny did not understand.

"You are brave but foolhardy!" cried Lolita. "Do not make such a rash move again!"

"You might have been killed," murmured Frances fearfully. "Don't try to be theatrical at a time like this."

Senor Gonzelez' good humor had deserted him and he now ordered the young people to remain silent. Impatiently, he berated his men for being so slow in their work.

At length, the last bar of gold was loaded into the sacks and the two men staggered down the steps with their burden.

"March!" ordered Senor Gonzelez, indicating that the young people were to follow after the outlaws.

The descent to the second gallery took a long while, and frequent rests were made by the two ahead. Senor

Gonzelez gazed several times at the sky where a widening area of light warned that dawn was nearly upon them.

"We must make haste," he urged his companions, who sullenly retorted that he might help by sharing the burden.

"What will the men do with us?" Frances whispered to Lolita as the girls walked close together.

She answered with a shake of the head. Her own thought was that since Senor Gonzelez had spared them this long he might allow them to go when they were off the pyramid. Yet, considering the treatment he had dealt out to Juan, Carmen and her brother, she scarcely dared hope for a better fate.

"Andres is dead," she said aloud. "And his assassin walks behind me."

The words shocked Frances. "Juan and Carmen?" she asked in a faint voice.

"The same fate, no doubt."

A sharp command from Senor Gonzelez warned the girls to remain silent. They moved farther apart, and walked slowly on ahead of Benny, circling the pyramid in preparation for the final descent.

Suddenly, as the two outlaws ahead rounded a corner, they stopped short, and with a shouted warning to Senor Gonzelez, dropped their loot and reached for their weapons.

As Benny and the girls flattened themselves against the wall of the pyramid, several shots rang out, fired by

those who had lain in ambush. Lolita's heart leaped with a hope that the men were *Rurales,* sent to apprehend Gonzelez and his companions.

Caught completely off guard, the two desperadoes had no opportunity to defend themselves. They were quickly overpowered, but not so Gonzelez. Using the girls as a shield, he waited, revolver in hand, ready to shoot it out if a move were made to take him. The *Rurales* dared not fire, for to do so would endanger the lives of the young people.

Unseen in the darkness, a man crept high along the overhanging terrace. Suddenly, with panther-like agility he leaped down on Gonzelez, twisting the revolver from his hand. It whisked through the air and fell into a deep crevasse between the rocks.

The two men came to grips near the edge of the narrow gallery. The younger one was strong and courageous, but not the equal of the outlaw in a test of sheer brute power. Slowly, Gonzelez pushed him closer and closer to the precipice. The young man fought desperately, giving the last iota of his strength in the struggle for life.

Lolita screamed in terror, for she envisioned both men plunging over the side of the pyramid to their deaths. It was Frances and Benny who instinctively acted in unison. Darting forward, they seized the struggling men, and at the risk of being pulled over the edge themselves, dragged them away from the precipice.

Gonzelez sought to shake off his new attackers, but before he could free himself, one of the *Rurales* ran up, bringing the unequal contest to a quick end. Steel bracelets were slipped over the man's wrists. As he was led past Lolita by an officer, she could not resist saying ironically:

"*Muchas gracias,* Senor, for your help in carrying the gold down the pyramid! May you have a pleasant sojourn in jail!"

The young man who had risked his life to capture Gonzelez, slowly picked himself up from the ground, brushing away the dust. Lolita went over to ask if he were injured. As they faced each other, a cry of joy and incredulity fell from her lips.

"Andres!" she murmured. "Andres! Is it really you?"

CHAPTER XX

AN ENDANGERED FORTUNE

"LOLITA!" cried the young man, grasping her hand. "You are all right?"

"Oh, yes, Andres. But you—I thought—"

"That your brother was dead?" he finished with a laugh. "I might very well be if your friends, Benny and Frances hadn't pulled me away from the precipice!"

"You know their names, Andres? I do not understand."

"Until now, it was I who did not understand, Lolita. I have much to explain, apologies to make, but this is neither the time nor the place. Let us go to the *hacienda.*"

"It is guarded by men from the village, Andres. They will make trouble for us if we return there."

"The *Rurales* will accompany us and explain," declared her brother. "With the Aztec gold recovered, the Calverton troubles are at an end."

"I hope so," sighed Lolita. "Where are Juan and Carmen?"

"At a little village some distance from here. I will tell you everything when we reach home. It is a very long story."

Benny and Frances shared Lolita's happiness that her brother was alive and unharmed. Andres was a handsome, well-built fellow with dark hair and eyes; when he smiled his resemblance to his sister was marked. As he shook hands with Benny and Frances, thanking them for saving him from a fall to almost certain death, they remarked that his voice sounded strangely familiar.

"You have heard it before," laughed Andres. "As I told Lolita, I owe you an apology, which I shall offer very soon."

Senor Gonzelez and the other two prisoners were marched down the pyramid by the *Rurales* who made them carry the heavy sacks of gold and silver. Before the base of the great monument was reached, the sun rose over the rim of the earth, dispelling the last gray shadow of night.

"A gorgeous sunrise," observed Lolita, turning to gaze toward the horizon. "Prophetic perhaps—the down of a new life for the Calvertons."

Andres and the *Rurales* had left their horses tethered in a clump of bushes, while the ponies ridden by Gonzelez and his companions were found close by. The outlaws were compelled to mount, and under guard, were taken to the *pueblo*. After the men had been locked up, and the priceless Aztec relics turned over to responsible officials, the *Rurales* obligingly rode back to the Calverton *hacienda* with the young people.

The courtyard was still occupied by the self-

appointed guards, but their arrogance vanished at sight of the *Rurales*. When the true situation had been explained, they offered humble apologies to Andres and Lolita, and departed, rejoicing that their objective—the recovery of the Aztec collection, had been achieved.

Donna Raquel went into a paroxysm of hysterical weeping as she clasped Andres in her arms. She had been convinced she would never see him alive again. Her torture of mind had been intensified by a fear that Lolita, Frances, and Benny might also meet disaster at the pyramid.

"You are all here safe!" she declared tremulously. "I shall never let you out of my sight again."

"We're quite content to remain by the fireside," laughed Lolita. "Or a good bed would be better. I feel as if I could sleep a thousand years."

While Donna Raquel fluttered nervously about preparing a hot breakfast, they all sat in the spotlessly clean tiled kitchen, listening attentively to Andres' account of his adventure.

"I'll start at the beginning," the young man declared. "As you know, Mother, one of the villagers lodged false information about me with the Immigration officials. So I slipped over the border without permission and reached Lormsdale safely.

"I hadn't been there a day when I discovered that I had been followed. Fearing an attack, I obtained a revolver, but managed to lose it almost at once. You know my failing, Lolita."

"Uncle Jim found the revolver on the bedroom floor in the octagonal house," interposed Frances.

"That's where I thought I left it," Andres replied, "but when I went back it was gone."

"It was Gonzelez and his men who followed you from Mexico?" inquired Lolita.

"Yes, but I didn't learn his identity for some time. I tried to locate the hiding place in the octagonal house, and figured out it would be similar to that secret vault in the old fort. I never did find it, but I know you were more successful."

"Yes, we found the picture brick, only to have it stolen," Lolita said slowly.

"I'll come to that part in a minute. I lived in the cupola of the house for a few days, but after Gonzelez made his presence known, I hid out in the woods. Fearing that he might attack me unexpectedly, I buried the San Paulo plans near a hollow log.

"So you were the fellow who commanded Fran and I to drop those papers!" cried Benny. "I thought I'd heard your voice before!"

"Guilty," acknowledged Andres. "I was only bluffing, for I had no weapon. I would not have harmed you in any case."

"But Andres," protested Lolita, in a hurt tone, "if you were at Calverton Place when I was there, you must have known I lived at the cottage. I came there to search for you. It was cruel of you not to communicate with me."

"Perhaps I did do wrong," the young man admitted, "but I forgot to say that the Immigration authorities were after me, and I was afraid I might involve you with the law. I intended to remain in hiding only a day or two, and I kept in close touch with Juan."

"It was very inconsiderate of you," Lolita said, refusing to be mollified. "And you weren't very nice to Benny and Frances."

"I am ashamed to say I did not trust them," Andres acknowledged frankly. "Juan prejudiced me against them by declaring they were in a conspiracy with Sidney Harmond."

"Juan was suspicious of Mr. Harmond from the day we met him," said Lolita. "I feel so ashamed—"

"You needn't," cut in her brother. "I'll have something to tell you about Sidney Harmond. But first I'll explain Juan's actions. He persuaded me that if I revealed my presence to you, you would mention it to Harmond or Benny and Frances.

"Now I'm really furious at you, Andres Calverton! So you thought I couldn't be trusted?"

"It wasn't that at all," her brother said hastily. "I was in a tight situation with the Immigration authorities. I thought, too, that if we established any contact, Gonzelez might shift his attack to you."

"He did beat up Juan most cruelly."

"I know, Lolita. Gonzelez was after the San Paulo plans and he couldn't be certain who had them. Well, to return to Juan, he thought he saw Gonzelez riding

in Sidney Harmond's car. When Benny and Frances did nothing about the matter, he was more than ever convinced they were working with the man."

"But Gonzelez wasn't in Mr. Harmond's car," protested Frances.

"Juan may have been mistaken. I've not had time to clear up that point yet. Anyway, it helps to explain Juan's attitude. He disapproved when Lolita took you completely into her confidence."

"He might have talked the matter over with me," said Lolita.

"That wouldn't be Juan's way. He kept close watch of you, and he followed when you went down into the cellar of the octagonal house. You know what happened there."

"I rather think we do," replied Lolita grimly. "Juan took the brick, locked us in, and apparently, you were a party to it!"

"You were most high-handed in your methods, Andres," spoke his mother in a severe voice.

"I knew I couldn't make anyone understand. But considering our distrust of Lolita's friends, it seemed the best thing to do at the time."

"I'd like to take you back there Andres, and lock you up for three hours!"

"Was it that long, Lolita? I'm sorry, really. You see, we stopped in Lormsdale, and I had Juan telephone Mr. and Mrs. Kellog, so I knew you would be let out all right."

"Most considerate of you, my dear brother."

"And Juan left a note to explain everything."

"A note?" Lolita asked in surprise. "We found no note."

"He left it somewhere in the kitchen of the cottage."

"We didn't find it."

"I can understand your feelings, Lolita. You thought Juan had betrayed you."

"Naturally. But in my wildest nightmares I didn't suppose you had a part in the scheme!"

Ignoring the remark, Andres went on with his story. "Carmen, Juan and I started for Mexico, but we were followed by Gonzelez. He attacked us, wounded Juan, and forced our car into the ravine. However, we escaped on foot, and I took Juan to a native hut close by. It wasn't until a few hours ago that I could get him to a doctor."

"Is he badly hurt Andres?" Lolita asked anxiously.

"Yes, he lost considerable blood from his wound. But Juan is tough. He'll pull through all right."

"I'm thankful for that," Lolita murmured. "And Carmen?"

"Unharmed. When we abandoned the car we left behind our luggage which contained the picture brick. I suppose Gonzelez took everything."

"The car was empty when we found it," said Benny.

"I figured Gonzelez might understand the significance of the Painted Shield, and would visit the pyramid," Andres went on. "So as soon as I dared leave

Juan, I sought the *Rurales* and went directly there."

"And like the hero in a western movie you arrived at exactly the right moment," declared Lolita, smiling.

"I did do you a little service," Andres laughed. "Considering everything, don't you think you might forgive me?"

"Perhaps, after I have had my breakfast. But not until then."

While Donna Raquel poured steaming hot chocolate into several cups, she reminded her son that he had promised to tell more about Sidney Harmond.

"I have saved the good news for the last," he replied.

"And is Sidney Harmond such good news?" demanded Lolita. "An angel in disguise?"

"Harmond is a shrewd business man who hopes to get our property from us for a trivial sum."

"His friend, whose name I do not know, made an offer of five thousand dollars," Lolita said slowly. "It seems to be all the house is worth."

"Oh, the house—" Andres made a disparaging gesture. "But the land, that is a different matter."

Frances leaned eagerly forward. "It doesn't have a deposit of valuable mineral?"

"Oil."

"You're joking, Andres," accused Lolita.

"Do I look as if I were?"

"But there are no oil fields near Lormsdale. We are too far west to be in the belt."

"How do you know we are?" demanded Andres.

"How can anyone be certain?" He drew a piece of paper from his jacket pocket and tossed it across the table. "See, I've drawn a rough geological map of the section. I've seen similar formations right here in the Mexican oil fields!"

"Why, that looks very much like a drawing which Sidney Harmond made!" exclaimed Frances, peering over Lolita's shoulder.

"Harmond has had a geologist look over the property," Andres revealed. "His judgment only served to confirm mine. I tell you, when first I made the discovery I was so carried off my feet I nearly lost interest in Donna Paquina's so called secret!"

"We'll be rich," said Lolita dreamily. "Can't you see those old pumps chugging away, sucking up oil, pouring a steady stream of money into our pockets? Andres, we'll be able to go to college in the States! What won't we do?"

"It costs money to drop a well," said Andres dryly. "And we might not strike oil."

"We wouldn't be Calvertons if we didn't take that chance!" cried Lolita.

"I could do some of the work myself," Andres said thoughtfully. "I'd sink the well just south of the house on the dome. If we were lucky it wouldn't need to be drilled very deep."

"Oh, we must go ahead, Andres! Mother, don't you agree?"

"The chance may be worth taking," agreed Donna

Raquel cautiously, "but we must not be carried away until we have made a more careful investigation."

"I wouldn't be crazy enough to start work until experts had studied the layout," declared Andres. "The thing to do is to hold on to the land."

"How fortunate that my message did reach you, Lolita, before you left Lormsdale," remarked Donna Raquel.

"Your message, Mother?"

"You wired me for permission to accept Sidney Harmond's offer."

"Mother, you didn't agree?"

"Yes, daughter, I did. Why do you look so strange? What is wrong now?"

Lolita sprang up from the breakfast table, in her excitement overturning a chair.

"Andres, you must ride to the nearest telegraph station at once!"

"But why?"

"Why?" cried Lolita. "Because I told Mr. Kellog if Mother's acceptance came through he should arrange details of the sale with Sidney Harmond! We must countermand the order before that old rascal gets his hands on our oil!"

CHAPTER XXI

BLACK GOLD

"IF THERE'S anything in all the world uglier than an old oil derrick I never wish to see it."

Lolita sighed as she gazed toward the stiff tower of wooden lace-work whose skeleton rose beside the octagonal house at Calverton Place. On the derrick floor a half dozen sunburned men dressed in rough, shapeless clothing, their hands and faces grimy, were going through routine movements which from a distance appeared quite aimless. For twelve days now, with an unending clanking of chains, sizzling of steam, feverish struggle and turmoil, the rotary drill had bored deep into the earth.

"You're just discouraged today," said Frances comfortingly. "Your derrick would seem beautiful if only oil were flowing."

"I am discouraged. We've sunk nearly all our money into this wretched well, and now—a dry hole. It's unbearable."

"You may strike it yet." Frances spoke with a confidence she could not feel.

"Andres has just about given up all hope. Everyone—" Lolita waved a hand which included the long

row of parked cars, the men, women and children grouped by the wire fence which held them back from the derrick. "—Everyone says we're crazy, that we never had a chance from the first."

"Uncle Jim didn't feel that way. He still believes you'll strike oil sand."

"I know," Lolita said gratefully. "You've all been wonderful. And to think that you, and Benny, your aunt and uncle, made a long trip back here from Illinois just to see us bring in the well!"

"We wanted to come."

"It's meant everything to us, having you here. But after our splendid adventure in Mexico, I'm afraid this will prove an anti-climax."

Frances shook her head. "Calverton Place has an attraction all its own. And we may see the big show even yet."

"There's not much chance now. As a last resort Andres says they're going to shoot it with nitro glycerine. The explosion is supposed to develop a series of cracks so oil can flow into a pocket or something. But if there's no oil—"

Lolita sat down on the running board of a parked car, her eyes roving hopelessly about the countryside. Gone was the quiet, the tranquillity. It seemed impossible that there could have been so many changes in a year's time. And yet, in many ways she had lived through an eternity since that memorable night on the pyramid of Cochicean.

She smiled as she thought of her fear that Mr. Kellog would dispose of Calverton Place before word could reach him. Even if he had not received Andres' telegram, the property could not have been sold without her mother's signature upon certain necessary papers. Sidney Harmond's little scheme had been exposed, and the man had admitted that it was his intention to gain possession of the oil land. Publicly humiliated, he had severed his partnership with Ralph Leigh, taking himself to another state.

"I almost wish now we had sold Calverton Place to Sidney Harmond," she said bitterly. "In that case, I suppose he'd have brought in a gusher!"

"Well, at least we showed him up in his true colors."

"Yes," agreed Lolita absently, "but I was glad it turned out that Juan was mistaken about Senor Gonzelez being in his car. The person he saw probably was a geologist that Mr. Harmond brought here."

"Everything has been explained, I guess, except the anonymous note which Mr. Leigh received, saying he would be wise to investigate this place."

"Didn't I tell you?" inquired Lolita. "Mr. Leigh traced down the writer months ago. It was a Mexican who lives in a shack down the river. It seems he had observed Andres in the house and thought he meant to damage the place. He obtained Mr. Leigh's name from someone in Lormsdale and wrote to him."

"Then every single detail has been cleared up."

"Yes, the Calvertons saved their honor and lost a

fortune," commented Lolita. "I truly wish I had never set eyes on this place."

"You *are* in a black mood today," Frances said sympathetically. "But I understand how you feel."

"I'm a poor sport, that's all. I kept telling myself we were taking a big chance to drop the well, while in my heart I believed it would come in. And how much it would have meant to us!"

"To everyone," agreed Frances. "A new field would have opened up here. I can close my eyes and see it. Oil officials, drilling contractors, speculators, hordes of people swarming into Lormsdale, the town booming, this desolate land becoming productive. People would have been made rich over night."

"Especially the Calvertons," finished Lolita. "I mind more for Mother than myself, and Andres had set his heart upon finishing college in Texas. But what's the use to think about it now? It only makes me feel more miserable."

The girls both arose as they saw Benny running down the hill toward them.

"Any news, Benny?" Frances asked quickly.

"They're going to shoot her! I came down to tell you."

"When?" demanded Lolita, catching her breath.

"Any time now. They've fed her over four hundred quarts of nitroglycerine in shells. She ought to go up any minute."

"Andres is staying up there?" Lolita asked anxiously.

"Sure."

"Oh, I wish he wouldn't. Nitroglycerine is so dangerous."

"You couldn't drag him away now. Not with a twelve-mule team. I'm going back."

"You are not," corrected Frances, catching him by the coat. "You'll stay right here with me until they shoot that well!"

Benny grumbled and complained and would have overruled his sister had not Mr. and Mrs. Kellog walked down the road just then. They quickly put an end to the argument.

"We'll all go to the fence—no closer," declared Mr. Kellog.

The barbed barrier had been erected as a safety precaution to keep curious persons from approaching too near the well. Not that there appeared to be any hazard to the casual eye, but experienced oil men knew that friction from the drill or even a dropped tool might cause a disastrous fire. Word had spread that the well would be "shot" but few appreciated how carefully the work must be done.

Minutes seemed hours as the crowd stood waiting and watching. Lolita, her hands tightly clenched, found the careless comments of those about her hard to bear.

"She ain't never a comin'," said one.

Another added with a note of impersonal satisfaction: "The Calvertons sank every penny of their money in the well, and all on the boy's say-so."

Weary from the long wait, many persons turned away from the fence. Suddenly, a subterranean rumble shook the earth. Benny seized Lolita's hand, shouting:

"She's coming!"

"*Something* is coming," the girl muttered. "But what will it be?"

Every eye was glued upon the derrick. Benny pointed dramatically to the pipe where a trickle of mud had become a full stream. A strong odor of gas permeated the air.

Then with a mighty cough, brown oil shot high from the well and feathered into spray.

"Look at her go!" shouted Benny, tossing his hat into the air. "She's a blowin' her head off! You've got a cat to tame, 'Lita!"

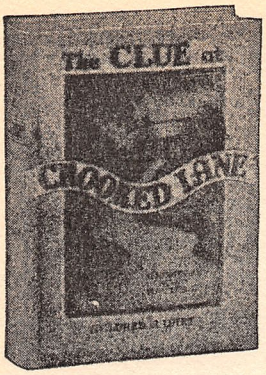
"But is it real oil?"

"Real, honest-to-goodness oil!" laughed Frances, thumping her companion on the back. "And from the way that thing is spouting you must be right in the center of the field. The Calvertons are made!"

Tears of joy streamed down Lolita's face. Unaware of the laughing, screaming crowd; unmindful of the greasy, ugly oil which was splattering her dress, sprinkling the parked cars, smearing the octagonal house, she stared straight before her as one hypnotized.

"How does it look to you now?" shouted Frances above the tumult.

"Beautiful, just beautiful," Lolita laughed as she wiped a black smudge from her cheek. "With oil flowing, that old derrick is quite the loveliest sight in all the world!"



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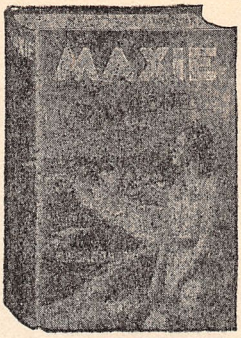

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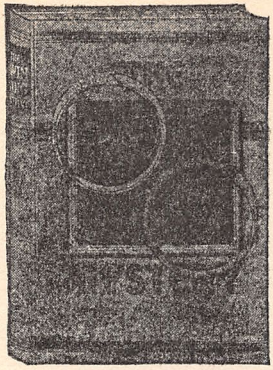

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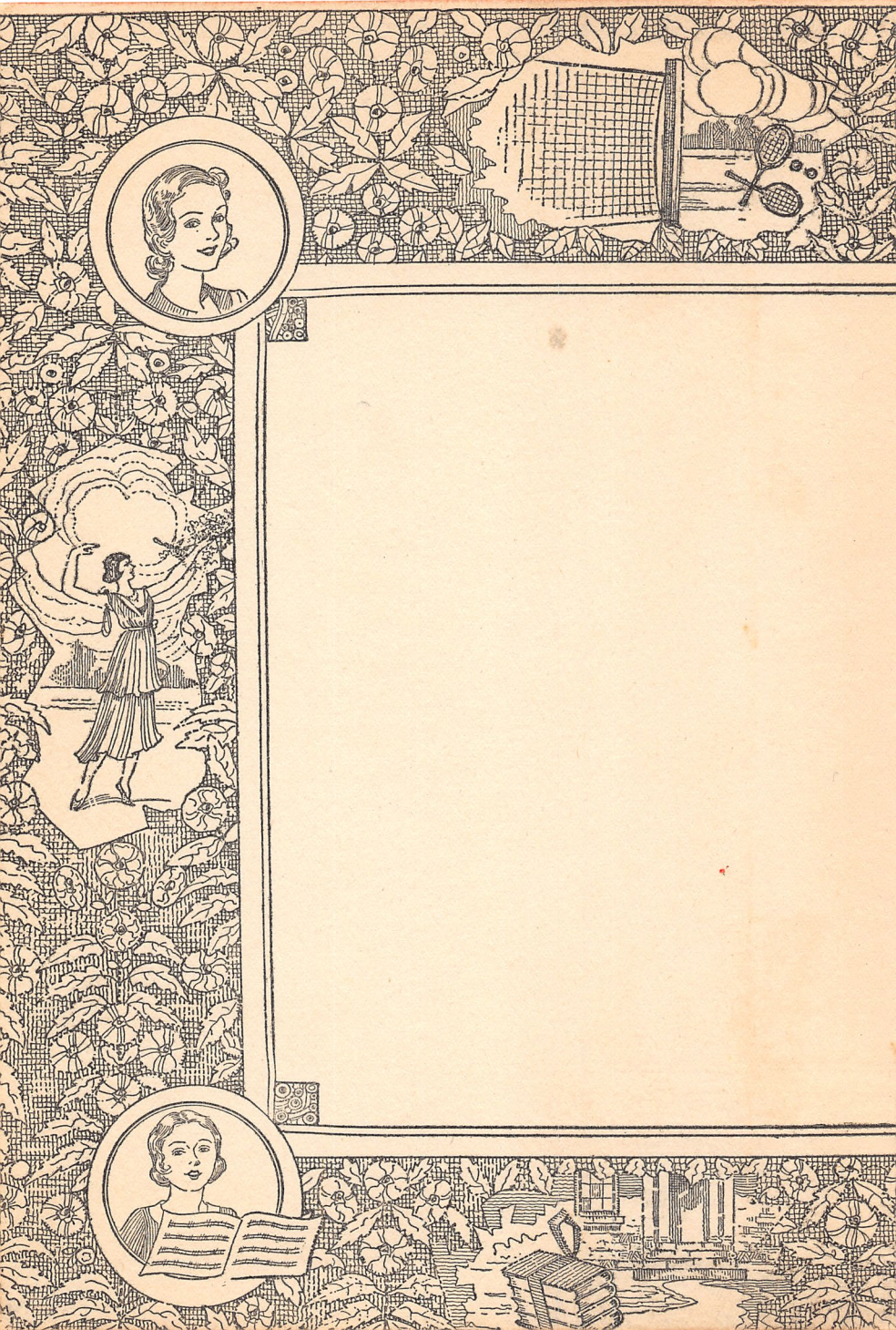

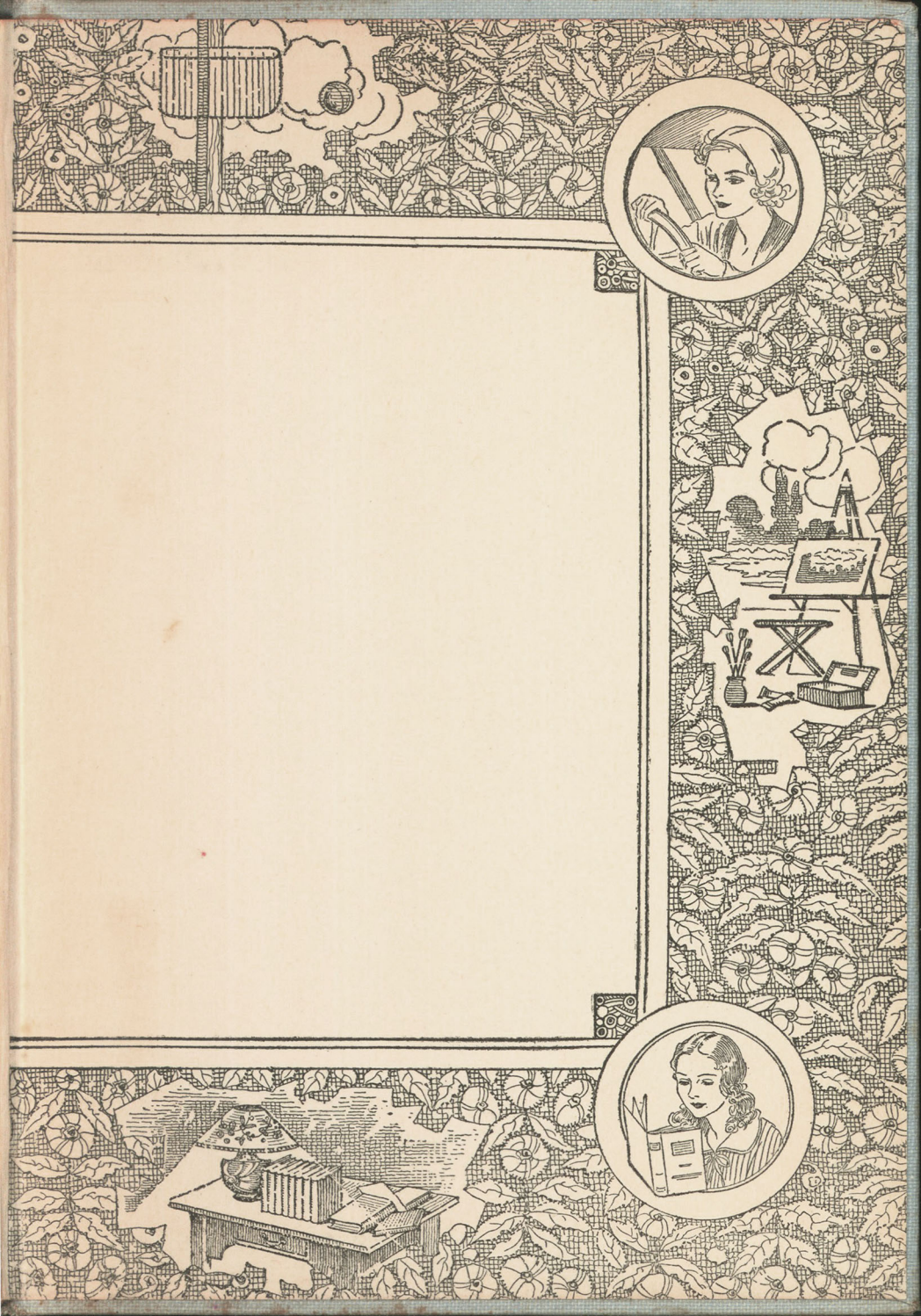

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